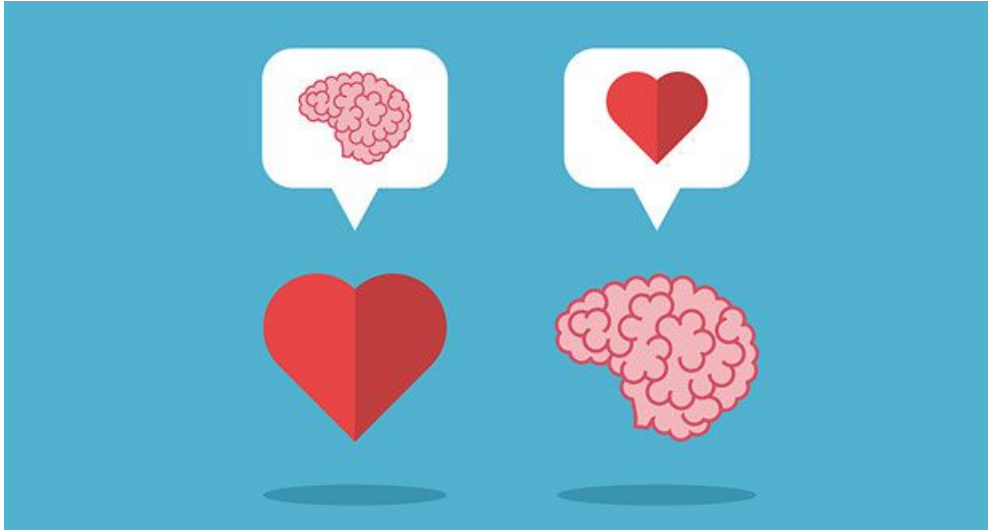


What's the one trait all good leaders need?

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Emotional intelligence, says Byron John, Managing Director at Vizeum South Africa. Here Byron shares his thoughts on getting an "emotional upgrade".



I was asked to write an article on Emotional Intelligence (EQ). I must have displayed some sort of (positive) EQ behaviours amongst my peers to be given a topic technically I have very little knowledge about, but I am always up for a challenge. So that's my caveat... I am certainly no expert, but my life story is one that has certainly given me the opportunity to hone my EQ skills. Yes, it is all about practice and exposure in my view, which starts at a very young age.

What was the quantity and quality of the emotional exposure you received between the ages of 1 and 5? Very hard to remember no doubt, but this is the foundation or, to use an apt digital metaphor, the key "software" installed into your subconscious. Most of our emotional programming is done at such an early stage with nominal upgrades as we get older (unless there are some dramatic interventions or life experiences along the journey, both good and bad.) So you can, for the most part, blame your parents for the emotional "software" they've programmed you to be. And like most things in life, the more time, energy and investment in developing your emotional software over time, has resulted in your subsequent emotional maturity. Are you still in a beta version? 2.0? 3.0? Or are you due for an upgrade?

Power of the people

EQ is a business-critical skill that very few leaders in business possess because the perceptions of the value of emotion is still seen through the lens of over-sensitivity, which "does not make for good business practice". It's an archaic view based on old-school management theory, i.e. people make the products, which clients buy which make the profits. In our industry, however, the people are the product, which the clients buy which makes the profits. So, as a leader, if your people are the primary source or service that your clients "buy", the performance and wellbeing of your people should be your number one opportunity as well as your number one risk to the business. And what is the primary force driving each one of your staff? Their emotions!

Fluffy? I think not.

Let me use a small example of how emotions drive (in many cases) economics.

On 14 February 2018, just after 22:30, the South African rand strengthened to an unbelievable R11.66 to the dollar – an

exchange rate that hadn't seen since March 2015. It would appear that one single event had changed the entire South African economy. Even if short-lived, it had a huge impact on the entire country. What was this moment? It was the moment Jacob Zuma resigned as president of South Africa. And whilst we think the root cause of this positive change in our rand is best left shrouded in financial complexities, I know the real reason for this massive gain for our country. It's called "hope".

There are too many stories of how hope alone has changed the face of our planet, liberated societies and exponentially accelerated business performance. But to tap into these unbelievably powerful emotional triggers, you need a leader who's willing to go there. Too many leaders just don't have the emotional skills to venture there. Not because they don't want to; I just think they don't have the upgraded software to do so.

Four ways to upgrade your EQ

Listen a lot more. When someone is speaking, stop thinking about your own answers and just listen to what they're saying. Ask more questions before you give an answer. Why are they saying what they are saying? Now you've moved from being emotionally ignorant to emotionally aware. Once you are emotionally aware, you are more emotionally in control. And once you're emotionally in control, you are able to emotionally express your response in a far more empathetic and judicious manner. That's a good start.

See each individual as someone with a low self-esteem. Most of us are, but are too scared to admit it, so we emotionally mask it with interpersonal awkwardness, e.g. arrogance, over-confidence, sticking to the topics we're experts in, being too opinionated on everything or retreating, shutting off or just shying away from saying anything. Navigating through these emotional masks is incredibly powerful in motivating people at an individual level, but you first need to recognise and deal with your own mask, and this is certainly not a quick or easy exercise. I'm still dealing with mine.

Build people up. When last did you give a colleague a compliment? When last did you encourage a staff member? When last did you acknowledge someone's good work? Whatever your answer, it's not enough. If your positive input towards an individual can significantly increase their own performance and the performance of your business, why aren't you emotionally triggering this every day with all your staff? There's enough research to prove the correlation between staff morale and business performance, so we're crazy to not, at the very least, consider implementing mechanisms to mandate this across our businesses. I think the reason we don't, is because we either think it doesn't work, we feel uncomfortable doing it or we simply have never experienced its impact ourselves.

Be emotional. You've heard the saying "get in touch with your emotions". I'm not talking about being sensitive or nice, I'm talking about being brave, authentic, honest and uncomfortable. Think of the star performer in your company right now who is deserving of every accolade and earned every cent of their salary. Imagine if you were to approach them tomorrow and say: *"I want you to know that your work ethic is inspiring. What you've done for this business and your team is nothing short of incredible. I know you get paid to do your job, but you've added an invaluable contribution to this company which I am truly thankful for."*

People don't remember for long what you say or do, but they'll forever remember how you make them feel and it often inspires even greater results. If sharing the above feedback with one of your staff scares you, you definitely need an upgrade.

I'm not saying we need to hold hands around the fire and sing *Kumbaya*. Nobody's got time for that. It's about deleting your old-school views of what EQ means and developing a new respect for the power it has in sustaining the number-one reason your clients want to continue doing business with you when the contract is up for renewal: the quality of the relationship.

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