

The Real Source Of Leadership Power

by Gregg Thompson

I must say from the outset that when the words “leadership” and “emotions” are used in the same sentence, I cringe. Actually, a minute electrical signal is passed from my brain stem to a little almond-shaped thingy in my brain called the amygdala whereupon it is quickly compared to my personal library of weird and wonderful emotional responses created over a lifetime so that it can select one and use it to tell me how I feel about the sentence. Strange as it may seem, I - think of “I” as the rational, conscious, smart part of your brain - have little to do with the decision to cringe).

This reaction was likely formed early in my career when, as a young engineering technologist, all of my projects were horrendous failures, not because of their lack of technical merit, but rather because of the irrationality, foolhardiness, idiocy (I could go on but I’m sure you get the idea) of equipment operators. Apparently an insidious, deep-seated mental weakness rendered them incapable of recognising the sheer brilliance and elegance of my ideas. The Director of Engineering apparently shared this weakness since he arranged a most unwelcome transfer to Personnel Records six months into my job. That foolish move cost him a brilliant young technologist who graduated near the top of his class. It nearly cost me my career.

Leaders today rarely fail because they back the wrong product or make a misstep in an acquisition. They fail because they are insensitive, critical, selfish, arrogant and negative. They fail because they are emotionally weak, like that young technologist. They fail because they are unable or unwilling to harness the power of their own emotions and those of others.

The single most powerful force in the domain of leadership is emotion; the emotions of the leader and his or her constituents.

Some of us are born with natural leadership charisma, but I have never met a natural born, emotionally powerful leader. In fact, just the opposite is true. By nature, we are superficial, self-absorbed creatures. To become emotionally powerful leaders takes a real concerted effort but ... it can be done. When one simply decides to study and master one’s emotions, connect with and positively influence others, it’s like turning on a light switch. The change is immediate. Overnight your leadership power will increase tenfold. It is remarkably straightforward and doable.

Get up close and real personal with the real you

Recognise and embrace your emotions. These are not simply outcroppings of your personality. Emotions are you. Think of spending your life swimming in a pool of your emotions. They are everywhere, and you are always under the influence of at least one of them. While you may think you know yourself well, most of us really don’t. Knowing your MBTI personality type is not enough. Get up on your own balcony. What really makes you tick? What makes you happy, sad, glad and mad? Watch yourself interact with others. Become aware of your emotions as they occur. Note the events that trigger significant emotional reactions. (Remember the amygdala thingy? That’s where all your historical emotional patterns are stored. These can be changed but it takes lots of introspection and hard work. This is where the most profound leadership development starts. This is where you create a foundation on which your leadership power sits.)

Become the master of your own emotional ship

Stop being ruled by old patterns of feeling-thinking-acting that no longer serve you well. Get into the habit of pausing and reflecting. Ask yourself, "What's really happening here? Regardless of how I feel, what's the next best step for me, as a leader, to take?" (Give your neocortex a chance. This is the "I" part of you that resides in the upper part of your brain. It is the smart, cognitive part where you make rational, informed decisions. Don't leave the amygdala on its own or you will end up with the same old reactions. Introduce your neocortex to your amygdala. Get them talking. This will allow you to create the habit of fully experiencing your emotions while consciously selecting your reactions. This will be the main source of your leadership power.)

It really is not all about you

Great leaders seek to create selfless, personal connections. This can only happen when people feel good, not about you, but about themselves in your presence. It really is not all about you. Practise seeing the world through the eyes of others. Practise being totally present with others, even for a short time. Great leaders invest considerable time and energy in understanding others and seeking ways to serve them. Others are not simply pawns in their game but real people with unique needs, fears, aspirations, and, yes ... their own amygdalae! (that's plural for amygdala...btw)

Speaking of amygdalae, these little items make being truly empathetic quite difficult. We naturally see people through our own emotional patterns, which are formed from our experiences, values, beliefs and so forth, and it takes a concerted effort to shut the amygdala up for a little while to really see others as they see themselves. Great leaders gain tremendous personal power by making this effort. Weak leaders don't.

Stop sucking the light out of the room

Are you a pervasive, positive influence on the people in your organisation? When you walk into a room, does it become brighter or do you suck out all of the light? Moods make all the difference. And the leader's mood is especially infectious. Great leaders have a contagious optimism about their organisation's future and constantly convey a strong sense of confidence in themselves and others.

Yes, you can choose your mood. When your neo-cortex and amygdala are on good speaking terms, you can engage that part of you that smiles, sees the best in others, is joyful and is nice to be around. This is how your leadership power influences others.

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