

The Power of the Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

By David Clarke, Managing Director – Genos U.K.

Emotional intelligence involves a set of skills that help us to perceive, understand and influence our own and others feelings. Workplaces that either don't have these skills, or don't encourage people to apply them, aren't fun places to work. Beyond this, they're also highly unlikely to be as effective or productive in the long term, as the people in the business never truly connect and collaborate with each other. For long-term success, businesses need leaders that inspire people, connecting the hearts and minds of all employees. These businesses need emotionally intelligent leaders.

Leaders high in emotional intelligence are connected to the people around them. They present as authentic and empathetic, willing to practice expansive thinking, constantly seeking to include and understand rather than exclude and ignore. This means resilient and empowering leadership that isn't afraid of others opinions and doesn't feel the urge to have the final decision or always be proved correct. These leaders are centred and in control of both themselves and the world around them, which inspires confidence and trust, creating an atmosphere where employees energetically collaborate to produce the best possible results for the business.

The question is – who do we think of when we reflect on our own personal experiences of emotionally intelligent leadership? The sad truth is that, for most of us at least, there's a relative paucity of these people in the places we work. The majority of businesses still think of emotions and feelings as valueless and reward people not for HOW they get results but WHAT results they deliver. As a result, when we consider our own experiences, we are far more likely to recall distracted and busy leaders that don't have time to listen or who don't *really* listen even when they're sitting in front of us watching our mouths move.

The good news is emotionally intelligent leaders are 'out there' somewhere; and some companies are even actively seeking to foster and encourage these people. These businesses aren't blazing a trail of innovation and cutting edge practice. They're simply accepting that there is a better way of doing things.

Contact us on

Ph: +61 1300 443667

Fx: +61 1300 720658

support@genosinternational.com

www.genosinternational.com

Sydney

Suite 1c

207 Young Street

Waterloo NSW 2017

Australia

London

Genos Europe

91 Waterloo Rd

London SE1, 8RT

UK

San Francisco

Genos Americas

1750 Montgomery St

San Francisco CA 94133

USA

They believe that creating a better place to work is achievable, and that assessing and developing the necessary skills is far from rocket science – it's actually tried and tested practice that has been around for years.

These businesses seek to identify and develop the five practices that all emotionally intelligent leaders have in common. They:

1. Perceive and understand their own feelings
2. Effectively express how they feel
3. 'Tune in' to the feelings and emotions of others
4. Manage facts and feelings to produce great results
5. Positively influence their own and others feelings

Emotionally intelligent leaders perceive and understand their own feelings.

Emotionally intelligent leaders understand how events and triggers in the workplace result in emotional responses. They come to terms with the fact that these emotional responses are based on prejudices that have formed through a combination of their experiences, beliefs and values. They are aware of how this cocktail of perceptions and the loose recollection of facts influences them, the behaviours that can result (if this influence goes unchecked), and what these behaviours and emotions can mean for the people they work with.

The outcome of this knowledge is that they are aware of the impact their feelings and emotions have upon their thought processes, which allows them to minimise the times at which it can inhibit their effectiveness at work. This strengthens their decision making immeasurably. By becoming aware of their own emotions and how they manifest, they also become more connected with their employees.

Take, for example, the experience we've all had of the manager who becomes inflamed by the messenger whilst failing to address the content of the message. We've all had to impart bad news at some time or another - and it just doesn't help if we know that the recipient is likely turn a shade of red or jump to conclusions. Emotionally intelligent leaders understand what events trigger strong emotions and they're aware of when it happens. This allows them to express these feelings appropriately, better manage the situation constructively, and – most importantly of all – avoid negatively impacting on the employee that brought them the problem in the first place.

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Emotionally intelligent leaders effectively express how they feel.

By understanding their own feelings emotionally intelligent leaders become better equipped to express themselves. This skill allows them to help others understand and engage with their decision-making, whilst also becoming more authentic with the people they work with. This enhanced understanding and authenticity improves their interpersonal connections right across the business, which significantly increases their interpersonal effectiveness.

This improved emotional expression builds trust and mutual understanding with their colleagues – from which greater collaboration and cooperation springs. Rather than being perceived as ‘vulnerable’ for expressing themselves, these leaders win hearts and minds with appropriate levels of honesty. The key here is that they learn to express themselves in the right way, to the right degree, at the right time, and with the right people.

The benefits to a business of a leader who can appropriately express themselves are twofold. Firstly, there are no surprises and people know where they stand with these individuals. This dramatically reduces ‘avoidant’ behaviours and encourages open dialogue. Secondly, their honesty allows everyone in the business to better understand and interpret the decisions they make. This will engage employees more with these decisions, as well as increasing the likelihood that they’ll fully and properly ensure their execution.

Emotionally intelligent leaders ‘tune in’ to the feelings and emotions of others.

Herb Kelleher, CEO and founder of Southwest Airlines, once said that “the business of business is people” – and he couldn’t have been more right. Emotionally intelligent leaders know this to be absolutely true, and so they ‘tune in’ to the emotions and feelings of their people, empathising with them and seeking to understand what drives and energises them. These leaders spend time getting to know the way their people think and feel and, most importantly of all, spend time demonstrating and using that knowledge constructively.

These behaviours build strong interpersonal connections between employees and the leaders in the business. These are the bonds that form the foundation of a highly engaged and motivated workforce. The strong emotional connection of an employee to a leader will always exceed their connection to the organisation as a whole – just as the motivation derived from a passionate and inspiring

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leader will always go far beyond the motivation supplied by any level of reward or threat of punishment.

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”

Maya Angelou

A story that illustrates this perfectly was once given to me by a friend of mine who had recently started in a new role at one of Australia’s banks. It was day two and he was waiting for the lift. Suddenly, to his left, he saw a tall enigmatic figure; it was Gail Kelly, the CEO. Bob (I’ve changed his name to protect his identity) was slightly sheepish and continued to look ahead. As the lift arrived they both entered and turned to press the buttons and face the door.

“Hello Bob, how’s day two?” Gail asked. Bob was slightly gob smacked. He wasn’t senior management. He wasn’t even middle management. How did Gail know his name, let alone that it was day two? “Great thanks” was about all Bob could muster. “OK, well I look forward to tracking your progress, and if there’s ever anything I can do to help, please just let know. It’s great to have you on board.” Gail smiled and exited the lift.

Now Bob never did get to know how Gail knew his name, or how she knew that it was his second day in the office. But that never mattered. What mattered to Bob was that she knew, that she had taken an interest in him, and that she cared. This made him feel great. As time ran its course in his new role, Bob came to realise that this wasn’t an aberration; this was par for the course with Gail. She really cared, she really did take an interest, and as a matter of routine she regularly spoke to employees and asked them how they were and if there was anything she could do to help.

Needless to say that Gail was, and no doubt still is, loved and admired by all of her employees. She takes the time to connect with and understand them. The way she makes employees feel motivates and engages them, and this reflects directly in the results of the business.

It was no surprise to Bob then, that a year or so later, one of the biggest banks in Australia came knocking and recruited Gail as their new CEO. She had grown the revenue and profits of her previous employer dramatically, making the bank

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the number one for customer satisfaction in the industry. Her new employer wanted her to do exactly the same thing for them - and you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who would bet against her.

Emotionally intelligent leaders manage facts and feelings to produce great results.

By combining what they know with how they (and others) feel, emotionally intelligent leaders can make better decisions by being more expansive and inclusive in their approach. This allows them to build more effective teams, playing to the strengths of individuals, whilst also understanding the limitations and 'blind spots' of each employee. This, in turn, results in more energised cooperation and collaboration, which 'gets things done' and fosters greater innovation.

These leaders see emotions and feelings as vitally important, not to be overlooked, and usually predicated on important subconscious thoughts, experiences and knowledge. By tapping into the emotional and feeling aspect of each employee they can help people keep open minds, explore and reiterate ideas as they flow around the business, and expose employees to situations that will bring out the best in them.

Ever wonder why there isn't much collaboration or cooperation in some businesses? The answer is likely to be found in the way the leaders, and employees who mirror their behaviours, manage facts and feelings. Facts will be treated with a premium – the currency with which knowledge and status is acquired. Feelings, on the other hand, get in the way of making fact-based decisions: they add no value and muddy the water.

The problem with this approach is that everyone has feelings. Managing facts and not managing feelings has only one inevitable conclusion: a business where people don't care about or understand one another. It's no wonder then that the people working in these businesses don't collaborate or cooperate. They're far too busy dealing with facts to care about the people sitting next to them.

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Emotionally intelligent leaders positively influence their own and others feelings.

Being self aware and aware of the feelings of others, and then expressing and reasoning with these feeling, is only the beginning. Once emotionally intelligent leaders are aware of how they (and others) feel, and the consequence of these feelings, they set out to actively manage and control them in a way that produces dramatically improved results for the business.

This active management and control makes them resilient rather than emotional and empowering rather than indifferent to their employees. Their observable behaviour makes them appear more centred and in control - a calming influence on those around them. These emotions and behaviours are contagious: with positivity breeding positivity. They develop this proactive control and management through reactive emotional management techniques (such as breathing control) and proactive emotional management techniques (such as working to change their mindset from negative to positive with regard to specific situations).

The best example I can think of where a leader clearly demonstrated this management and control came in a company I worked with in 2007. The business itself had a strong and highly respected reputation. A reputation built on precision and accuracy in its work that inspired confidence and had customers calling in orders faster than they could be processed.

The problem was that the business needed new systems. The old ones were outdated, highly inefficient, and in dire need of replacement. But how to do this with customers queued up for the next six months? The only solution was to implement on the run. There was always going to be a first customer through the new system: it was just a risk that needed to be managed.

The complexity and severity of the issue soon escalated however. Not through poor planning, but rather as a result of a collision of unforeseen events, the breakdown in the implementation of the new system happened right at the worst possible moment. There couldn't have been more customers depending on the new system working and their guard had just been dropped as the implementation was deemed a success.

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To cut a long story short, the implementation tanked. It was a complete catastrophic failure that left a team of ten people facing fifty angry customers who all had faulty product. The initial response of the team was fear, panic and desperation. How could this possibly be managed without being a PR disaster of epic proportions? The answer was soon forthcoming and brilliantly delivered by the Managing Director of the business.

By accepting that it had happened, and my managing and controlling the way the team felt about it, he began a mantra of “we are where we are.” Being concerned or showing desperation added no value for anyone, least of all the customers involved, and it wouldn’t change the situation. The Managing Director got the team together, calmly worked through how the issue should be handled, and then assigned people responsibility and accountability based on how they were feeling and what this disposition best enabled them to do.

The result was exceptional. The clients weren’t happy, of course, but the pragmatic and calm approach taken by the team in contacting them and working through solutions added immeasurably to the effectiveness of the outcome. Despite their initial fears, only one customer really made any type of formal complaint, and there were even customer accolades saying how brilliantly the whole event had been handled.

The moral of the story is that a lack of emotional management or control never adds value to a business. Responses such as fear, anger or anxiety spread like wildfire; and businesses full of such emotions will never function properly. In contrast, strong positive emotions can inspire people to things even they didn’t know they were capable of. It’s all about having people in your business that can manage and control these things.

Ultimately, emotionally intelligent leaders have a deep and profound impact on our lives. They help to centre and connect the world around them, bringing us closer and making us feel part of something special. They create workplaces full of trust and cooperation, where people are encouraged to think expansively, and take ideas and move them around the business finding places for them to grow and flourish. They motivate and engage each and every one of us, themselves included, by tapping into the inner sources of strength and drive that gives us purpose in our lives and makes us feel like we belong.

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So the final questions here are:

Why aren't there more of these leaders – and why don't businesses do more to reward, promote and publicise these people?

No one wants to shut out their emotions or ignore their feelings, and yet businesses seem adept at encouraging and rewarding precisely this behaviour.

What can you do to personally address this issue and help create more emotionally intelligent leaders in your workplace?

The tools and processes already exist to create leadership factories full of emotionally intelligent leaders. It's all about focus - about wanting to do it. As David Maister observes in his book *Strategy and the Fat Smoker* we all know what we need to do to lose weight or stop smoking. It's not about the strategy, it's about the execution.

So the challenge to each and every one of us is to want this badly enough that we do something about it. Is there really anyone amongst us who wouldn't prefer to work in a business full of emotionally intelligent leaders? If that is the case, which I'm sure it is, then start acting on this today. Take up the challenge and make it happen in your place of work - because the alternatives surely aren't very appealing?

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