

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE TIME OF THE CORONAVIRUS

Moldvoy AKOS

Babes Bolyai University

Cluj Napoca, RO

akos.moldvoy@eon.com

Abstract

In a volatile world, when most of the social conventions are violated, when leaders have to work remotely with different generations having different technical knowledge when the wellbeing and health of the employees and their families are more important than daily activities when the pressure of uncertainty affects the efficiency of the employees, leaders and managers have to rethink the frame of values and missions of the company, and how they will handle the social problem. The COVID-19 pandemic started in late 2019 and continuing in 2020 is a test for all societies, companies, leaders, and it is also testing the status quo of the leadership theory. A crisis can emerge in many different forms and COVID-19 is one of them. Big companies have formulated business continuity plans for emergencies. Usually what companies omit to consider is emotional intelligence, one of the crucial factors of effective crisis management. An emotionally intelligent leader can have better solutions and reactions in a crisis than a leader without emotional intelligence competencies. This short paper explores a series of early risk mitigation strategies to prevent COVID-19 and prepare leadership to face this inevitable challenge. The research design types used are literature review and naturalistic observation. The research methodology is observation.

Keywords

Leadership; Emotional Intelligence; Coronavirus; Risk mitigation; Handle crisis.

Introduction

The world reacts with unprecedented efforts to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders try to keep mission-critical initiatives moving forward, but it is predictable that sooner or later organizations will confront a black swan event. In a very volatile environment, a good leader should always follow the strategy of preparing the things he knows, to be prepared for the things he does not know.

In the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies know that

1. They have to continue their critical activities and for this
2. They have to keep and motivate their employees

For the first point, to continue their critical activities, almost all big companies have business continuity plans, fallback procedures, and desktop procedures. Keeping and motivating employees in a crisis is a challenge and it can be considered/called a leadership art. One of the most important skills of a leader to achieve these goals is emotional intelligence. This article will focus on the importance of emotional intelligence in the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

As mentioned, leaders should prepare/apply/work with what they know, to be prepared for the things they do not know. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the recovery from it will most probably require a special blend of skills. We do not know

exactly what skills will be required from leaders in the future, but we know which skills are important after a few months of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

In this paper, we take the four domains of the Emotional Intelligence presented by Daniel Goleman (1995, pp.71-72): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and check how leaders can prepare, use and benefit from them. Each of these (domains) can help a leader face any crisis with lower levels of stress, less emotional reactivity, and fewer unintended consequences.

Self-Awareness

The definition of self-awareness is: "the ability to focus on yourself and how your actions, thoughts, or emotions do or don't align with your internal standards." (<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/self-awareness>) Self-awareness is considered very important, because allows people to better know their internal states, preference, resources, intuitions, and also allows them to understand better the emotions of the people around them.

Self-awareness can be split into two. The first category is internal self-awareness, the way how we see ourselves, and the second category, the external self-awareness, the way how others view us. The leaders who see themselves as their employees do are more efficient. The employees have better relationships and are more satisfied with them. Leaders must actively work on both, seeing themselves clearly and getting feedback to understand how others see them. People having a high self-awareness level are usually people balancing the scale.

Usually, leaders think, that the more experience they have their self-awareness will increase. This is not always true. Experience can lead to a false sense of confidence about performance and can make leaders overconfident about their level of self-knowledge. High experience can make leaders not questioning their assumptions. The more power a leader has, the more likely he overestimates his skills and abilities.

"At the core of EI, self-awareness is the area that leaders' least enjoy or spend time on." (Murray, 2020) They see it as self-focused or a waste of time. Leaders can effectively work with others only if they get really good at knowing themselves. When a leader can see clearly himself, he will be more confident, more creative, he can make sounder decisions, build stronger relationships, and communicate more effectively. He will less likely lie, cheat, and steal. He will be more effective with more satisfied employees.

Although most of the leaders think they are self-aware, just 15% of them have this skill (Eurich, 2018). It is important to see how our values, passions, aspirations, behaviors, and reactions fit into our environment and how their impact on others is.

A good manager shouldn't be led by emotions. (Goleman, 2013, p.31) Being aware of one's feelings makes one in charge. In the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the employees are working from the home office. The efficiency of the employees is not the same. Often, when having online meetings with the noise of their children can be heard, and one has the impression, that people are not focused on the discussion. Small mistakes that didn't

occur before started popping up. All these make a leader angry. The question is how do they manage these situations?

One should be aware, that in a crisis when the health and the well-being of the family are at risk, employees cannot focus on their work as they did before. Leaders should analyze every mistake individually, and where it is possible to implement additional controls in the process, so the same mistake will not happen again. For the cases where additional controls do not solve the problem, and mistakes are caused by a low level of focus, leaders should discuss assertively with their employees, explaining the consequence of their mistake, but making them confident that finding a solution to the problem is a common goal. Making people understand, that in these cases the future of the company is also important, is not so easy, but organizations do not hire leaders to maintain the status quo, they are hired to drive the future.

Performance and target settings need to be thought out differently. The focus is to act as one team, to fight for survival. The weighting assigned to individual objectives should give way to collective, shorter-term team-based targets. The whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts. Companies that can keep their employees engaged and motivated during the first half of 2020 will take advantage of the global economy in the second half of 2020.

The good news is that self-awareness can be improved. For a leader, it is important to improve his self-awareness, as this is associated with higher job and relationship satisfaction, personal and social control, and happiness. The highest the self-awareness is the lower will be the anxiety, stress, and depression of a person.

There are more techniques to improve self-awareness, but we will take on the most important.

-Look at yourself objectively: analyze and try to improve the behaviors and reactions you don't like. It is interesting how we see our values, passions, aspirations.

-Keep a journal: some of the reactions and behaviors may not be appreciated by others. Keep a journal and note all the cases when people disagreed with you. You can also use the journal for self-analyze. "It allows you to identify, clarify, and accept your thoughts and feelings. It helps you discover what you want, what you value, and what works for you. It can also help you find out what you don't want, what is not important for you, and what doesn't work for you." (<https://positivepsychology.com/self-awareness-matters-how-you-can-be-more-self-aware>)

After identifying the behaviors and reactions that need to be improved write down your goals, plans, and priorities. Having a plan helps to start improving the skills. It is always good to do daily self-reflection. Even if you started to improve your skills, this takes time. Self-reflection helps to have a good picture of where you are in the process. Introspection doesn't always improve self-awareness. Sometimes it can be ineffective because most people are doing it incorrectly.

Practicing meditation and other mindfulness habits helps in clearing the mind from negative emotions and negative energy. After negative emotions are cleared it is easier to start planning and focusing on the activities you have to do, and also helps in the good collaboration with other people. Mindfulness refers to paying attention to yourself and your surroundings rather than getting lost in thought or ruminating or daydreaming.

Meditation is a practice for focusing the attention on one thing, like a breath, a mantra, or a feeling, and letting thoughts drift by instead of holding on to them. Both practices can help in becoming more aware of your internal state and reactions to things. They can also help to identify thoughts and feelings and keep from getting caught up in them. Another practice is yoga. Yoga helps the mind to learn discipline, self-acceptance, and awareness.

Taking personality and psychometric tests can reflect who we are and how we think and react. A test can have a good result, just if the one filling it does it honestly. Ask trusted friends to describe you. It can be the best test. People who know us very well can have a different view of us as we do. It is always hard to receive negative feedback. But if one is considering the negative feedback a constructive one, that person can already start to improve their skills. To get a comprehensive view you need to talk to a variety of people. High self-awareness is a good predictor of success in life because a self-aware person knows when an opportunity is a good fit for him and how he can take advantage of it. Becoming a good listener can also increase self-awareness. By being open to someone else, we can learn to listen objectively to what the person wants or needs to share. This also helps to listen to our inner dialogues and opinions objectively.

Self-Control

Self-control is defined as “the ability to manage actions, feelings, and emotions and to regulate and alter responses to avoid undesirable behaviors, increase desirable ones, and achieve long-term goals.” (<https://www.yourdictionary.com/self-control>) Self-control is important in achieving common goals such as losing weight, exercising regularly, eating healthy, not procrastinating, giving up bad habits, or saving money. Self-control is also important for maintaining healthy behaviors. What we eat for breakfast, whether we go to the doctor regularly are all decisions that are impacted by our levels of self-control and have the potential to affect our health.

Emotional intelligence means being aware of our emotional state. Being emotionally intelligent means that we know what are the emotions we feel and we can name them accurately, and we can express them in a non-harmful way. We do not/should not have to feel overwhelmed by emotions. Usually, we suppress emotions when the information they try to convey seems uncomfortable. This happens quite often to leaders, and because they don't look to the full situation their perception of the situation stays the same. In situations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotion we most likely suppress is fear. Emotionally intelligent leaders try to understand the reason for the fear and find solutions to reduce it.

We have to face and solve the suppressed emotions, because these will cause stress, and stress harm our immune system, relationships, and peace of mind.

When managers are led by their emotions, the part of their brain responsible for the planning and the strategy is affected. Without self-control, the amygdala part of the brain is making decisions. (Goleman, 2013, p.40) This part of the brain is responsible for the response to threats, real or perceived, and can overwhelm the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for planning and strategy. (Goleman, 1995, pp.29-30)

In the middle of a crisis, employees are expecting a strategy from their leader and not reactions. Research done by Richard Davidson (2013, p.17) and Jon Karat-Zinn (2012, p.28) shows that the brain can be trained to strengthen the prefrontal cortex's capacity to exert control over the amygdala. This can help leaders become more emotionally balanced and effective.

Every leader had at least one crisis that was not handled as they would have imagined it. A good exercise is to reflect on these and train the brain with solutions that could be used. In the past months, we have stepped into an unknown world where certainty is low and our safety is challenged. The system in which we work has turned upside down. Leaders face many situations for which they do not know the answer or do not have a solution. What is happening when a leader doesn't know the answer? Leaders do not need to know the answer to everything. What they have to do is to make the best decisions with the information they have. A more skilled leader can make better decisions than a less skilled one, using the same information.

Leaders should listen to the concerns of employees and where necessary acknowledge that there are no easy answers. They shouldn't be angry if the employees do not have the same performance in a crisis. It is an opportunity for the leaders to use their skills, to show and lead by example. Self-control brings the right decisions in difficult moments. Leaders should be understanding if there are occasional outbursts or changes in the behavior of the employees. They should bear in mind that everyone's situations are different; they should be sensitive to other experiences, especially where the future of a person's employment may be in question.

Leaders should spend time to spoil themselves, to find something each day, they enjoy. They cannot care for others without being healthy themselves. The most important techniques, to improve self-control are the following:

- Avoid temptation. This can be avoided by distraction. People should do whatever it takes to get their mind off the thing that is tempting them.
- Planning can improve willpower even in situations where people have experienced the effects of ego depletion.
- Focusing on one goal at a time can turn the behaviors into habits, and there is no need to devote as much effort toward maintaining them.
- Meditation is a great way to strengthen the self-control muscle, so people can better resist temptations. This technique can also help to learn slowing down the thoughts, which can help to control any gut impulses getting in the way of self-control.
- Sleep can help self-control. When we are tired, our brain cells' ability to absorb glucose is highly diminished. The brain's ability to control impulses is nil without glucose. What's worse, without enough sleep we are more likely to use sugary snacks to compensate for low glucose levels. So, if we are trying to exert self-control over our eating, getting a good night's sleep is one of the best moves we can make.

Social awareness

The definition of social awareness is: "the ability to take the perspective and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and

supports". (<https://www.transformingeducation.org/introduction-to-social-awareness>)

In March 2019, one of the big companies from Cluj Napoca announced to their employees, that a building with an asbestos roof was deconstructed in the neighborhood of their office building. The access of the employees was not allowed until the quality of the air was not checked, and management made sure that there is no risk. The testing of the air quality and the cleaning procedure of the area was a three weeks' process. At this time the employees worked from a different location and home office. The empathy of the managers in this period for the health of their employees helped the managers to solve easier the crisis. Employees knew that for the management the health of the employees is a priority, and they can focus on daily activities. One year later they are facing a similar situation with the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees are confident that their leaders are empathic and taking the best solutions.

Leaders are always under intense pressure from investors looking at the financial damage the COVID-19 pandemic is producing. But employees don't want to know how much the virus is costing the company, they want the same values and behavior from their leader, with which they are used to. People have to feel that the leader understands what they are going through. Making people feel secure and taken care of will help leaders get the workforce focused on preserving operations as best as possible.

Many employees work better in a physical environment and face-to-face collaboration. Changing this to a home office can easily impact their engagement and feeling of being properly enabled to do their job. For these employees is important to have daily calls with their leader but also to translate some of the office's culture to virtual work.

A good leader in a crisis should lead agilely. He has to change leadership styles, the work schedule plans according to the situation, and the needs of the team.

The most important techniques, to improve self-control are the following:

- Understanding the importance of listening: most of the leaders think they are good listeners, but the truth is they are usually too busy thinking of their next response to hear what others are saying. Good listeners don't assume they know or understand a situation before hearing someone out. When leaders start listening, they may be surprised by what they learn about their employees and organization.
- Repeat what was said: The best way to prove that you understand what's been said is to repeat back what you heard in your own words and ask for more information, if appropriate. This helps to show that you understand what was said, and it conveys to the other person that their opinion is valued and heard.
- Pay attention to the tone of the voice: pay attention to the energy behind what your employees say to get a sense of how they're feeling. This is especially critical during virtual meetings when you do not have visual cues. A person's tone of voice can help you get a read on how they're feeling and give you a better opportunity to choose the most appropriate response or course of action. The best leaders are in tune with others' feelings.
- Nonverbal expressions should be noticed. Sometimes employees say yes, but their physical reaction is telling no.
- Keep a finger on the pulse of the office: Observation skills are fundamental to social awareness. When you pay close attention to what's happening around you, your

awareness of your surroundings can help set the tone of how you approach varying situations.

- Notice the details: If you want to be connected to your employees, you need to keep your eyes open to your environment and really see what's in front of you. Make the rounds in the office regularly and observe what's happening. It helps to get to know your workforce as people and interpreting the mood of the team. Ask questions to show your employees that you're interested

- Stop taking notes: It's easy to miss something when you're busy scribbling away in your notebook. Put down the pen and look up from your paper in meetings. In a meeting, you should actively engage with others.

Relationship Management

"Relationship management is a strategy in which an organization maintains an ongoing level of engagement with its audience" (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/relationship-management.asp>) This is one of the most important but also one of the most difficult skills a leader should have in a crisis. Managing relationships among many people with a different personality, having the ability to inspire others, to manage conflicts, foster teamwork to move people in the direction you desire and all this in a home office way can take a lot of time and energy, but it can be rewarding. The leader should be the connection between people, and this connection can make a difference between a group remaining a group or a group becoming a team.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, daily discussions with the team are important. These meetings should not just focus on the daily activities, but also leaders should have a filling on the wellbeing of their employees. Leaders can use the phone, Skype, or web conferencing to connect. The emotional intelligence of the leader is not making the COVID-19 pandemic disappear but keeps the employees motivated. With motivated people, it can be easier to get through a crisis. When there is fear, it is the job of the leader to demonstrate compassion, set direction, and get people focused. Keeping people motivated and having a good relationship with the team can help in finding solutions. Leaders should be transparent with their employees. If the people know the problems the company is facing, and they are confident that their opinion matters forward-thinking strategies throughout the crisis can come. A strategy or idea coming from the team can be easier implemented as one coming from the leader. Employees put additional effort to demonstrate that their idea is a good solution for the problem. An emotionally intelligent leader knows that he has to offer these opportunities to the team members. A leader should be real. He should share with the team his personal worries, concerns, and common thoughts.

How can it be ensured that people still work collaboratively? Much of this comes down to communication. This means that leaders need to equip people with the right tools to support collaborative working in a digital environment. The suggestion is not doing this via email as messages can quickly accumulate and get lost, plus it's all too easy to miss a recipient out of the replies or accidentally hit 'reply all' were not required. It's a sure-fire way to stagnate any workflow. Instead, it should be considered having different workplace scenarios with the appropriate tools to implement each of these. Remote access to the workplace domain or intranet has to be ensured for everyone Everything needs to be installed and ready to go before remote work is assigned Everybody should

have access to what they need, whenever they need it – this will save hours spent searching for lost or inaccessible files. It is suggested using Google Drive to share and work collaboratively on different documents. Whether it's a shared calendar, word document, spreadsheet, or presentation, access can be granted to multiple people to give them instant access to the most up-to-date version of any file.

How can loneliness during remote work be prevented? The lack of social contact during lockdown can create emotional discomfort. The absence of workplace interaction, shared lunch breaks, social events, and even the simple 'watercooler chat' can trigger feelings of isolation during prolonged periods working from home. Without the usual team-building events and social opportunities, remote workers are feeling isolated in this respect. Video lunch clubs and social events are encouraged, to provide a bit of light relief with pet photos and personal milestones. It's a simple measure to take, but the resounding feedback from the team can raise a smile. Where possible, virtual meetings with the camera on are encouraged; just seeing a familiar face can make all the difference. With options such as Zoom, Skype, and Google Hangouts, it's easy to get set up. It is recommended to use these tools for social events too, whether that's a virtual lunch club, a quick chat, or even streaming an online exercise session. It's the perfect way to stay in touch with others while keeping in good health.

Conclusions

Organizations taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic will be the companies having leaders who drive change around how they operate, who focus on engaging, rewarding, and retaining employees. After the COVID-19 pandemic, people will remember two things about this crisis: How they got through it and the leaders who led the way. Leaders should think about how their team will remember them.

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Online resources

- <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/self-awareness>
- <https://www.yourdictionary.com/self-control>
- <https://www.transformingeducation.org/introduction-to-social-awareness>
- <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/relationship-management.asp>
- <https://positivepsychology.com/self-awareness-matters-how-you-can-be-more-self-aware/>