

Developing a Practical Approach to Emotional Climate

An aid to dealing with the effect of emotions in working relationships



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Working in corporate education I'm routinely faced with the challenge of demonstrating the workplace advantages that can be derived from a more structured understanding of the active emotional component in key working relationships.

I frequently perceive this component to be 'hidden in plain sight', manifestly affecting the ability of a group to work together effectively, yet unacknowledged by the group themselves as being a factor.

More often than not the negative impact of a poor emotional climate in a group is explained away as 'poor communication', 'lack of an agreed or shared objectives' or simply 'poor teamwork'. But when we probe these explanations and ask why the communication was poor, why the objectives weren't discussed or why the team doesn't work well together we begin to see that it's got a lot to do with interpersonal relations, and the emotions that we invest in these relationships.

The developmental approach that derived from Emotional Intelligence was a significant step in building the vocabulary and techniques that could be used to support groups in recognising and addressing their emotional landscape. However the commercially driven movement that rapidly grew around EI meant increasingly extravagant claims and multiple factions around different models, with correspondingly poor results when these claims were subject to proper scientific examination. As is often the case, I feel more comfortable acknowledging the source and professional influence of these approaches, but using them as constructs that inform, rather than direct, my work.



Let me explain that further. Unless asked by a client to administer and/or use an EI profile and the formalised approaches that are attached to this way of working I would prefer to address the emotional climate in a much less overt way. Much of my work is based on selecting/designing experiential learning environments and using the observed data that comes from these shared experiences to define the available learning. This is a very direct approach that doesn't rely on any instrument or questionnaire to suggest the behaviour patterns that might be operant in individuals or groups, but uses carefully constructed questioning to bring the attention of the group to the patterns that they have been part of.

Further questions extrapolate these direct observations and subsequent reflections to allow an exploration of whether these patterns are also at play in the workplace, what the effects of this might be, and what changes individuals and/or the group might consider.

Emotional Intelligence was conceived as a tool that would change peoples' perspectives on situations. It is also true that a professionally delivered experiential approach will achieve a similar shift. However, working experientially arguably offers a far greater potential to translate this change in perspective into real performance improvement.

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DESIGN

I'm going to offer some insights into how I would go about designing and utilising an experiential education approach that fully recognises the emotional landscape that is influential in the behaviour patterns of the subject group.

As ever we start to design the learning environment with a clear view of the desired learning outcomes. The first thing that I do in designing learning environments that develop EI is to get rid of the term EI, or pretty much any reference to emotion - it comes with too much baggage and misconceptions. I shift the focus of aims and objectives to 3 development areas:

- Relationship Development
- Leadership Development
- Communication Development



The order and relative emphasis of these will vary depending on the client needs, but these are the core menu items when compiling the desired learning outcomes.

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The next step is to hide the overt Relationship Development component in the other two! This sounds like a cop-out, but it's simply a way of deflecting the cynicism and scepticism that business audiences seem to reserve for approaches that place the interpersonal as the headline item. We're absolutely going to be working on relationships, but as the essential platform for effective leadership and communication. Of course there will be clients who have a corporate culture that makes talking emotion and relationships perfectly acceptable, or even a virtue, but the embedding of this developmental aspect in the 'harder' agendas serves to emphasise its role as a 'promoter of performance'.

The learning environment that will best deliver this is, to a very large extent, an experiential approach, creating engaging and varied shared experiences that can be subsequently reviewed in order to extract relevant learning. It is in the particular structuring of these reviews that we introduce the EI development agenda, recognising and encouraging an exploration of how relationships have a powerful influence on performance. My approach is to choose a sequence of learning tools that I know will challenge the leadership and communication skills of this particular group, and progressively increase the level of insight that I expect from the reviews. In this way there is a strong application of Kolb's Experience - Reflect - Understand - Apply cycle to develop the group's Leadership and Communication practice. Alongside the questions that I'm using in these reviews I'm also utilising questions that come from the (hidden) Relationship Development agenda. These have equal time / equal importance in the review but I utilise them as lenses through which I examine task performance and group dynamics.

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SO WHAT ARE THESE QUESTIONS AND WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

For me a useful framework for the development of these questions is the 2014 article that was published by Psychology Today *"How to Increase Your Emotional Intelligence - 6 Essentials"* by Preston Ni.

In this article the author offers 6 development areas that can be integrated into a comprehensive approach to developing individual EI, but they are equally useful in structuring an approach to the simultaneous development of individual and group awareness of how emotional response is affecting their performance. By choosing review questions that come from this framework I can, over a series of shared learning experiences and reviews, create a climate within which it is both legitimate and advisable for a group to manage their own emotional climate.



Ni's framework is based around developing these six areas:

1. The Ability to Reduce Negative Emotions
2. The Ability to Stay Cool and Manage Stress
3. The Ability to Be Assertive and Express Difficult Emotions When Necessary
4. The Ability to Stay Proactive, Not Reactive in the Face of a Difficult Person
5. The Ability to Bounce Back from Adversity
6. The Ability to Express Intimate Emotions in Close, Personal Relationships

I'm going to use the rest of this paper to illustrate how these 6 areas can be used as a source for the questions that will ensure that the emotional climate of the working group is recognised and becomes part of the post-activity review. In this way we are attending to the same agenda as that which is central to a more EI driven approach, but we're working with the immediacy of the shared experience.

These questions are really valuable either as part of a planned approach to work with a group to help surface some of the emotional landscape that is affecting their work and relationships, or more spontaneously as a response to a 'flare-up'. Facilitators are often very conservative in their work, wary of how they will deal with an emotional outburst from a group member, open hostility between individuals, or an emotionally expressed disagreement. Having a bank of questions such as these will make the facilitator better prepared for the intervention that will turn the emotionally charged situation into something that can be calmly and constructively dealt with.

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DELIVERY

As I suggested earlier in this paper we're envisaging a situation where we're working with a group to deliver a set of learning objectives that draw heavily on Leadership Development and Communication Development as sources. However, we also need to acknowledge Relationship Development as a potential learning area. To do that we need to utilise part of the review to pick up on the way that interaction between group members was influential in the way that the group performed.

This means that we need to structure the way we plan and facilitate the review so that, alongside task-related questions around leadership, communication, roles etc we need to protect the time available to direct questions that allow the group to explore the emotional climate of the working group. Overleaf are a number of examples that are offered as suggestions as to how these questions might be composed. I've used the Ni's 6 categories as a way of building versatility into these suggestions. Remember that these questions will be equally valuable as planned review questions, and as questions a facilitator can use to process situations where there is some emotional volatility in the group.



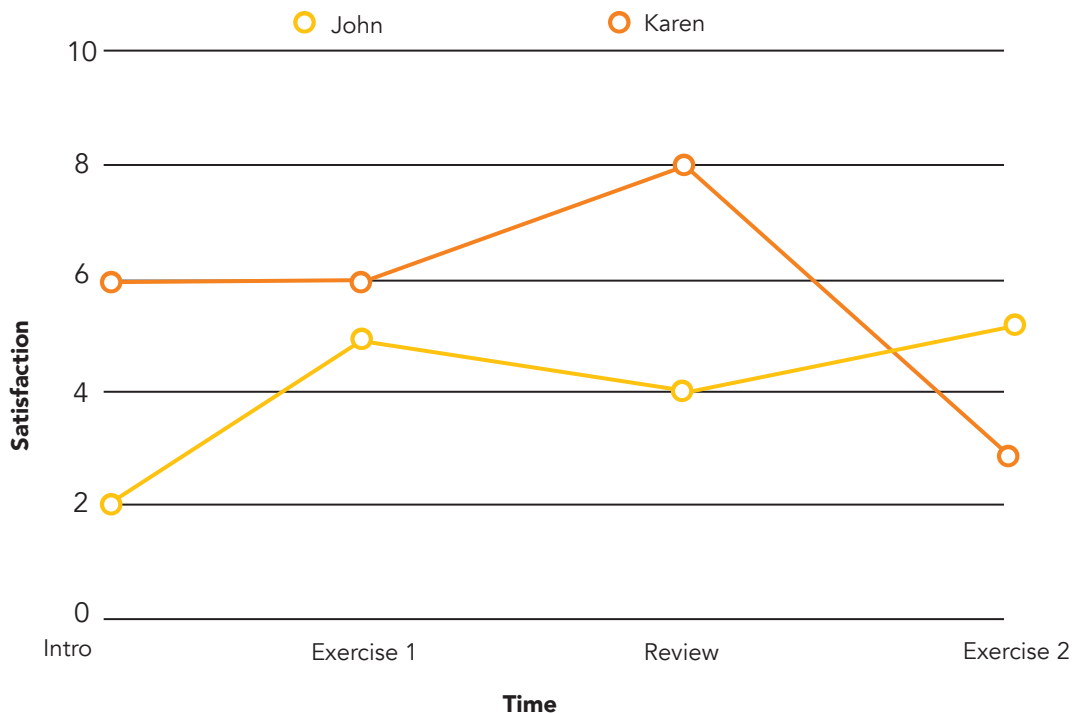
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THE ABILITY TO REDUCE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

This area relates to our ability to effectively manage our own negative emotions, rather than letting them affect our judgement. The central purpose of introducing questions from this area is to encourage people to think differently about something that has happened to them, specifically as this is the only way that they can feel differently about it.

A powerful technique to explore group members' unfolding sense of emotional engagement with what's happening in the group is the mood-graph. Ask each individual to draw a graph with time along the bottom axis and 'satisfaction' or 'happiness' up the left axis. Ask the group members to think about the activity that they have just done in e.g. 10 minute segments, consider how they were feeling at the time, and then represent their satisfaction (or happiness) on a scale of 1-10. Once each group member has their mood-graph complete then you can use this to explore the way that different individuals can, at the same time, be feeling very differently about what's going on in the group.



So the questions here might be:

- "What was it that enabled you to quickly move from feeling at a 8, to feeling at an 3?"
- "Thinking back to the times during the activity when you've scored yourself as feeling pretty negative about things, is there anything you could have done that would have made you feel less down?"
- "Do you think that other group members recognised that you were less than satisfied about what was happening? How would they know?"

These questions can also be adapted to work without the mood-graph, but you need to give people some time to think back to their experience during the activity - don't rush into the questions without allowing time for reflection

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THE ABILITY TO STAY COOL AND MANAGE STRESS

This area relates to the choices we have about how we react to pressure, particularly when we feel that it's somehow directed at us personally.

Introducing questions from this area is about illustrating the difference between a reactive response to the pressure, and a more assertive, pro-active response. Once this is established we can explore the impact of leading / working from each position.

Again, to be productive, group members need to be given time, and potentially some support, in reflecting on their shared experience before you open up your review questions. This will also help to diffuse any negative interpersonal feelings to the point where they can be constructively processed: particularly important when you consider that this area is one where individuals are investigating their own reactions in situations where they might well feel aggrieved about the behaviour of others.

So the questions here might be along the lines of:

"At what point in the exercise did people feel most under pressure? Where did this pressure come from? How well did you think that you reacted to the pressure?"

"Were there any times when there was disagreement in the group? How was that handled? How effectively?"

"Was there a time during the exercise when you considered saying or doing something, but reconsidered for some reason? What were the circumstances, and what made you reconsider?"

THE ABILITY TO BE ASSERTIVE AND EXPRESS DIFFICULT EMOTIONS WHEN NECESSARY

This area relates to having clarity about our own boundaries and being able to communicate these to others in a considered way.

Introducing questions from this area opens up an exploration of how beliefs and values can vary widely across even apparently homogenous groups, and have the potential to be highly influential in the way a team works together.

This is a strong area for exploration when you are considering the leadership patterns that are evident in the group, or where the group have had to decide on 'the rules' e.g. to what extent are we bound by what we've been told is 'allowed' and what isn't.

Effective questions in this area might be:

- "Were there times when the group disagreed about the way forward? How were these disagreements resolved? Was everybody happy about what was finally decided?"
- "When working in this group how easy is it to openly question the group decisions? Is that the same for everybody?"
- "How are decisions made in this group? To what extent is every group member included equally in the decision making process?"



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THE ABILITY TO STAY PROACTIVE, NOT REACTIVE IN THE FACE OF A DIFFICULT PERSON

This area relates to how we work with people whom we find difficult and/or challenging. We would introduce questions from this area when it has been obvious that there is some friction between individuals, and you've decided that there is potential benefit in publicly acknowledging this as an issue. Be aware that, in opening up this area, it's almost inevitable that you will be working with some powerful emotions. Ensuring that you have the trust of the group, and that they are working in an environment where a degree of emotional security has been developed are advised.

The questions available to you in this area will probably be directed, or have as their subject, individual group members or sub-groups. It would be potentially more comfortable to make assumptions that everybody will understand who you're talking about if you refer to the subjects indirectly e.g. the more vocal people in the group, or the person who seems most affected by this etc. Referring directly to the subject(s) of your question, using their name(s), eliminates any chance of mistaken identity where the group do not share your perception of the situation, and it's also probably more effective in that it opens the way for much more direct discussion by the group.

So the questions here might be:

"X, you appeared to withdraw from the planning after Y dismissed your suggestion. How did you feel about their response?"

"Early in your work there appeared to be something of a confrontation between A and B, to what extent did that affect the way the group worked afterwards?" "A or B, would you like to comment on the answers you've just heard?"

THE ABILITY TO BOUNCE BACK FROM ADVERSITY

As the title suggests, this area relates to how positively, or otherwise, we respond to challenging experiences.

We introduce questions in this area in order to encourage individuals and groups to recognise the choices that they have in terms of their responses to adversity. This can open discussions about how different people have very different tolerances for personal discomfort. These questions have a lot of validity in situations where the group has experienced a degree of failure in their efforts. The better the quality of your observation in these situations i.e. really looking hard at the situation and how group members are reacting to it will give you the material to make the questions so much more pertinent.

Watch what's happening, ask yourself why it's happening and what effect it's having, then compose your questions to accurately reflect your observations back to the group.

The questions here might be along the lines of:

"Why was X apparently feeling so down when Y seems to be very comfortable about what was happening at that time?" "X and Y would you care to comment?"

"A, you were really open in your celebrations when you finally got a result, what was going on for you?" "B, you seemed to be much less excited when things started going right?"

"What changes would you make to the way that this group operates if you wanted to make it more gritty and resilient?"

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THE ABILITY TO EXPRESS INTIMATE EMOTIONS IN CLOSE, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

This is an area of some sensitivity and not one that I'd routinely work on in an open-group review format. It deals with the facility to let those who are emotionally close to us know what we're thinking as it affects them. This might be positive and supportive, or constructive feedback that could be received as touching on sensitive and / or embarrassing areas.

However, the open group format is a good way of a group pooling their ideas about how this might be done effectively, whether it concerns relations between group members or not. Working with hypothetical situations can open up the conversation safely e.g. "If you wanted to let a close friend know that something in their behaviour was having an adverse impact on another person, maybe something that they are not aware of, how would you go about it?"



SUMMARY

I hope that in the suggestions I've offered in this short paper I've illustrated how, with a bit of thought and practice, the situations that arise where emotions are close to the surface in your group need not be intimidating or unwelcome. If you get a group to the point where they feel comfortable talking about their emotions in a structured and considered way it is a significant step in group and individual development. There's always an emotional component to change, and ignoring this risks the change not having the impact or 'stickiness' you want it to have.

Social media has, in my opinion, resulted in the positive situation where people are much more open to talking about their emotions. However, much of this is at a very reactive and superficial level which introduces the very real risk of conflict developing in situations where a deeper, more considered, exploration of the emotions of the people involved would have a much more positive outcome. Working with groups in a way that models a constructive emotional dimension offers a way to make this developmental step. It may mean that, as a facilitator, you need to put some work into your own emotional resiliency, but it's an investment that will be of real value to you and the people with whom you work.

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