

Does Your Amygdala Hijack Your Rational Thinking?

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2017, published in the Oct, Nov, Dec, 2017 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

You are a human being, right? So, the answer is a resounding "Sometimes!" When you lose control of your emotions, your amygdala has just superseded your good judgment. And if your self-image is one of a rational, logical, analytical person, driven by your conscious awareness of the cause-and-effect predictability of physics and chemistry, you likely are disappointed in yourself when that occurs. And you may mutter beneath your breath, "How did that just happen?"

Your amygdala is the part of your brain that controls your emotional responses to circumstances. For a small entity--the size and shape of an almond--your amygdala wields a lot of power.

When you face a fight, flight, or freeze situation, your amygdala is significantly involved in determining what you ultimately do. The amygdala processes the information in milliseconds and initiates behaviors before your rational brain can sort out the information, generate options, and make a conscious choice.

Your amygdala is heavily associated with storing and using memory. When faced with a potentially threatening situation, your amygdala quickly accesses your experiences to determine if what you are facing is appropriate for an immediate, intense response such as fear or anger. If so, the amygdala proclaims an emergency and recruits the rest of your brain and body to its urgent agenda.

Many of the memories that the amygdala has stored away emanate from childhood, well before we had a command of language to describe the emotional impact. Further, the amygdala is NOT the part of the brain that generates the word symbols we use for communicating with others. This explains why it is so difficult for us to articulate our feelings to others, and even to understand them ourselves!

Daniel Goleman brought this awareness to the public in his 1995 book entitled *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. Much of this article comes from information shared in that book.

A healthy leader can't afford to make decisions solely based on emotion or solely based on logical, rational thought. The neocortex, the thinking part of your brain, works in concert with the amygdala to generate your decisions. Finding the right balance, in the context of what you want to accomplish with and through other people, makes up what is now known as emotional intelligence.

To be an effective leader, you need both your emotional and logical minds. Further, your decisions should consider both your immediate outcomes and your long-term relationships with those you serve.

Most of the situations you and your team members face are not genuine fight-or-flight emergencies. Rather than react immediately, intentionally pause for your neocortex to consider multiple response options. Imagine (including asking your team members for ideas) the likely short-term and long-term outcomes of your behavioral possibilities, including the impact your actions will have on other people.

Even momentary, habitual conflicts that occur unpredictably can be improved by an after-the-fact analysis. (Go to the website below and look alphabetically for the article "Well? Better?") It's not easy to change a lifetime of anger responses when circumstances develop differently from what you expected or prefer, but it can be done with intentional effort!

If you have a history of temper flare-ups, you can change. However, you won't transform your behaviors if your objective is to placate your boss, customers, or spouse. Their persistent feedback may simply reinforce your ingrained "fight" response, stimulating you to justify tenaciously your habitual behaviors.

Instead, consider accepting their feedback as their accurate description of the adverse influence your behavior has on them. As a leader, you want to influence others favorably, not negatively, right?

When the effect of your behavior is different from what you intend, there's no blame to be applied. Simply accept the feedback as a gift given to you! You probably affect a few other people similarly. If you can beneficially change your response with these people, you can make sizable progress in replacing that bad habit that you've probably realized has had you trapped for an extremely long time!

Confessing this new insight to yourself and to those who have experienced your anger and impatience can initiate the demise of your old behavior and a beginning to new choices. With a little practice, you might just develop a beneficial, new habit--healthier for you and for those you influence!

Finding the right balance is perhaps the most difficult task of leadership. If your amygdala frequently hijacks your rational thinking, you are clearly out of balance! Consider apologizing to your colleagues. Ask them for support and patience as you experiment with changes in your perspective and behavior.

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach supporting organizations in Atlanta, GA. Almost 500 of his articles on leadership are available at www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives. He welcomes your feedback, comments, and questions at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or 770-286-2250.