

What You Feel May Not Be What Is!

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This article is based on observations I've drawn from personal experience and from friends, colleagues, and clients. It may not be very scientific, but there's enough anecdotal evidence to dictate that how you feel is rarely an adequate foundation upon which to make significant decisions!

Let's start with a rather common experience. You go to the dentist and the examination reveals that you have a cavity. The dentist gives you a shot of lidocaine, waits a few minutes, then fills the cavity. You leave the office. Your lip feels like it's three times its normal size, you have trouble talking, and you inadvertently bite yourself several times. You look in the mirror expecting to see puffiness, but everything looks normal (until you smile and your face is exceedingly crooked!)

So, which is accurate? Your lip feels huge, but upon visual inspection, it appears normal size. What you feel is not necessarily what is! That's an example of physical feeling. How about emotional feeling?

Some friends go with you to an amusement park. Two people rave about a particularly scary ride. You don't want to be accused of being a wimp, so you go along. But roller coasters and other thrill rides have never particularly appealed to you. Ten seconds into the ride, you know you've made a big mistake! Your heart is beating out of your chest and you have visions of falling hundreds of feet to your death. Of course, the ride finally ends and you survive.

The reality is that thousands of individuals have experienced that ride and no one died. Yet for far too many seconds, you felt anxiety as powerful as you've ever experienced!

Let me share one more very personal example. A year ago, our daughter married a terrific guy. At the reception, I had the privilege of dancing with my daughter to a song that has special meaning to me. She was radiant, and I marveled that this beautiful woman was the same little girl I used to tuck into bed each night. How had the years passed so quickly?

The words of the song that I knew well seemed so relevant! I knew at the time that I was smiling from ear to ear as we talked about our past together and her future with her new husband. (The photos confirm the huge grin!) At the same time, tears cascaded from my eyes. I made no effort to disguise the streams running down my cheeks.

Millions of individuals marry every year. My experience as proud poppa is really not all that unique. Yet I felt that no one could experience exactly the combination of satisfaction with the past and hope for the future that I was enjoying.

I've offered three examples of "feeling" something that may not accurately represent the truth of the situation. So how does that relate to how leaders influence their organizations?

Our bodies were designed to experience emotions. Passion provides powerful motivational engagement with our surroundings. Scientific analysis has determined that emotions are processed in the limbic system located near the center of the cerebrum, the largest of the three lobes of the brain. Rational decision-making, however, occurs in the front portion of the cerebrum.

Information is transmitted through the brain from neuron to neuron. The electrical signals that transmit sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing through your nervous system enter the back of the brain. On the way to the front of your brain so you can consider your options, the signals trigger your emotions. The physiology of this transmission makes it impossible to remain emotionally objective.

The process of communication between the emotional center of your brain and the rational decision-making forward portion is the physical source of "emotional intelligence." As a leader, you cannot ignore the emotional impact of situations you face. However, you are better served to make decisions based on "what is" and "what could be" rather than on whatever feelings you may have at a given moment. Ah, but that's often more difficult to actually do than it is to understand!

Further, everyone in your organization is significantly influenced by his or her emotions. You'd do well to remember that truth as you communicate with your teams. Join me next week as I explore some insights you should keep in mind as you engage your emotion-driven workforce.