

Since Emotions Drive So Many of Your Decisions...

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Since emotions drive so many of your decisions, shouldn't you understand what drives your emotions?

You've probably heard about emotional intelligence--how leaders handle their feelings and their relationships. The more aware you are of how various situations affect you and others, the more you are able to make effective decisions (and to influence the decisions of others in your organization).

Wait! I can just imagine that a few of you disagree with the title of this article. You may argue that your emotions rarely control your decisions. You may see yourself as quite logical, making your decisions rationally. You may be right. I just ask you to take a fresh look at how you make decisions.

Are you able to think about your behaviors as if you were a third-party observer? Imagine standing outside yourself, watching your behaviors while having access to your values and how you think and feel. Observing yourself like this requires some imagination. (To learn more about self-observation, visit my website, click on "Article Archives," then click on "Is the 'Little You' Watching?")

I speculate that few of your decisions are clear cut. You may have to select from among several attractive alternatives (and maybe some not-so-attractive options). Think about past choices you've made. Didn't you wind up making the decision based on how you *felt* about each possibility?

Still skeptical? Maybe you'd respond with "No, Dennis, I make all my decisions based on what I *think* each alternative will yield as an outcome." I used to have that perspective myself. I would seek facts, not opinions. I would do my own form of scenario analysis. If challenged, I'd defend my logic. I still do on occasion. Sometimes people observing me have even accused me of denying my feelings.

I'm going through a transformation, however. I'm slowly seeing in myself that many of my decisions are based on how I feel. It's certainly true of the decisions I make instantaneously. When the decision is a big one, I usually take more time to think through and analyze all the various possibilities.

If I were totally logical, would I try to convince someone of my perspective without first understanding his or her viewpoint? What if that other person has some important information that would change my viewpoint completely? If I always behaved rationally, I certainly wouldn't say harsh things to someone close to me. But it happens sometimes, and I usually regret what I've said--and how I said it.

So I'm learning more about this topic of emotional intelligence. In some ways, it seems like common sense that everyone already understands. In other ways, the insights have been very enlightening.

Just what is this thing called emotional intelligence? It's the ability to recognize and understand emotions combined with the ability to use this awareness to manage behavior and relationships.

Those who have studied emotional intelligence break the concept into four parts. The first two parts deal with understanding your own emotions and then managing your behaviors effectively. The second two parts deal with understanding the emotions of others and managing your relationships with them.

Self awareness. This is the ability in the moment to accurately sense your own emotions and recognize your tendencies in a variety of situations. To hone this skill, you'll need to think through what triggers your emotions and observe how you typically respond to situations. Improving your awareness requires you to work through the discomfort of exploring negative feelings you sometimes experience.

Self management. This refers to the actions you take (or don't take) in response to your emotions. If you are strong in this skill, you are able to remain flexible over a wide variety of situations, directing your behaviors toward a positive interaction.

Social awareness. This is the ability to discern the emotions of other people, understanding how they are feeling independent of your own perspectives. This is typically not easy to do because each of us is distracted and biased by our own emotional reaction to what is happening.

Relationship management. This is the ability to interact with others effectively, using awareness of your own feelings and those of other people. People who manage interactions well recognize the value of healthy relationships and are willing to forego instinctive reactions in favor of behaviors that will lead to greater interpersonal effectiveness over time.

I'll continue to explore this interesting and powerful concept known as emotional intelligence next week. If you have questions or comments you'd like for me to include in that column, please contact me.

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