

# Fact-File 40: Culture, Connectivity & EI – contributors to constructive workplaces...



Extracts from our Guides to Emotional Intelligence and Workplace Culture Change

## EI at Work Matters

Culture, Connectivity and Emotional Intelligence (EI) – three things that are essential to building positive, safe and supportive workplaces.

Many say emotions and work don't mix, that we should keep feelings to ourselves because they get in the way of rational work practices. But you can't lock emotions out of workplaces. They're the background to everything we do. They can sometimes get in the way, but they also:

- ❑ Play a big role in doing good work, getting on well with others and leading a good life.
- ❑ Determine how we behave and how much care, respect and positivity there is at work.
- ❑ Impact physical health because our immune system and emotional circuitry are linked up
- ❑ Are critical yet often overlooked ingredients in creating constructive, can-do work cultures.

“EI accounts for 58% of performance in all types of jobs overall. 90% of high-performers are high in EI, while only 20% of low-performers are.” (In EI-2 by Bradberry & Greaves pp. 20-21)

While we all have emotions, being able to handle them well doesn't come naturally. We all come equipped with emotional circuitry hard-wired into us, but instructions on how to use this has to be learned. That's where EI comes in – ability to:

- ❑ Tune into our emotional patterns and see how they affect what we say and do at work.
- ❑ Control our emotions to keep them in balance – especially disruptive or negative ones.
- ❑ Read emotions in others, connect with their feelings, get along and have good relations.

EI skills like empathy, perseverance, resilience lift levels of achievement, focus, optimism, joy and purpose – and decrease dysfunctional emotional patterns like anger that turn teams toxic, poison relationships and act as drawbacks to good work.

We've all heard the old adage “work smarter - not harder”. In the last 10 years, a number of EI skill areas have been identified that puts a new spin on it. Work SMART now stands for:

- S = Self-awareness
- M = Managing negative emotions
- A = Adopting more positive attitudes
- R = Relating and connecting well with others
- T = Teaming up with others

## Controlling Emotions

Many of us only notice emotions when we lose control of them. We confuse expressing feelings carefully while we're in control with venting our feelings 'in the heat of the moment' while we're out of control.

Emotions drive behaviour. A core concept of EI is knowing your feelings, knowing how they affect your behaviour and knowing how to curb those disruptive ones that make us say or do things that damage others (and don't help us much either!).

- ❑ Because emotions are catchy, those who can't or won't control negative feelings and come to work constantly cranky, create toxic climates that poison everyone around them.
- ❑ This leads to bad relationships, high anxiety, low morale and flow-on behaviours that flood teams with disrespect, blame, feuds, flare-ups and resentments. Not a pretty picture...

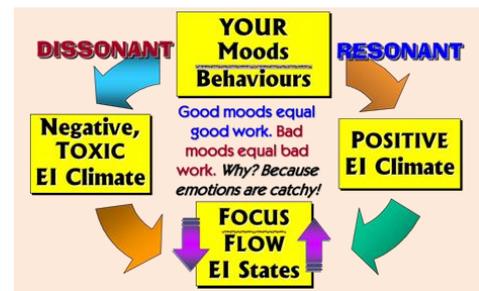
As this diagram shows, when we manage moods well we're cheery,

optimistic, supportive or connective – others act the same. We 'resonate' emotionally with each other. This helps us focus, retain energy, handle stress, stay emotionally balanced and creates a positive work climate.

- ❑ Bad moods are equally infectious. When we act cranky, impatient, intolerant, cynical or sullen, we infect others with toxic feelings and people treat you the same.
- ❑ If you're abrupt, they'll be rude back. If you blame, they'll blame back. When you attack, expect a counter-attack. You yell: so do they.

“When someone dumps their toxic feelings on us - explodes in anger or threats, shows disgust or contempt - they activate in us circuitry for those very same distressing emotions,” says Daniel Goleman in his book *Social Intelligence*.

People who say the moods they come to work in are no-one else's business are wrong. They infect others with 'bad-mood-itis' and badly need a dose of emotional self-responsibility.



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## Attack of the Amygdalas

Sounds like science fiction, but it's science-fact. The 'amygdala' is our fear and anger centre. We have two of these almond-sized neural nodes that control our fight-flight response and they tend to drive us all nuts at times.

- ❑ In situations where emotions run high, we're at risk of being hijacked by them... Feelings control what we say and do as our amygdala takes over and our rational brain takes a back seat.
- ❑ Under the influence of strong feelings we feel helpless to control, we act in ways that make things worse, escalate bad feelings, damage relationships and generate negative emotions.
- ❑ It's summed up when we say, "I didn't think – it just came out that way."

And that's an 'amygdala attack'. What Goleman, populariser of EI, calls an "emotional hijack". But before you consider an *amygdala-ectomy*, we'd better point out that your amygdala does a damn good job of protecting you too. The trick is learning to regulate the over-charged chemical messages it sends you that might be great in the jungle but out of place in the office, at the counter or on the ward.

To do this, you first have to work out what's going on for you when you get emotionally hijacked.

## Mapping your Emotions

In our EI clinics we ask people to practise a tool called *Emotions Mapping*. It's a template to reflect on Amygdala attacks you want to handle better next time. It works like this...

After you calm down, find a quiet space. Draw up the boxes

like a flowchart and start filling them in as you recall what happened to you.

- ❑ **First, note physical symptoms:** These are generated by chemicals you may or may not be aware of (eg. tightening of the jaw).



- ❑ **Now, note your thoughts:** There won't be one – there'll be a chain. Write all of them down...
- ❑ **Next, note feelings:** Like thoughts, as many as you can. Dig down below easy-but-lazy labels like 'angry' to deeper feelings like 'resentful'.
- ❑ **Finally, note actions:** What you said and did. Did you get sarcastic, grow critical, argue?

Your reaction may also stem from deeper *identity dramas* – fears, insecurities or perceived lacks. And that's the last box on the map.

## Emotional Balancing Acts

Mapping hijacks is one thing, but how do you use this to handle them better? Here's a few tips:

- ✅ **Identify triggers** – situations that get up your nose. Knowing your alert signals tells you you're entering into imminent hijack territory.
- ✅ **Control Vents.** Venting is commonly seen as a healthy way to relieve emotional pressure but research says it doesn't – it winds you up and dumps bad feelings on others.
- ✅ **Don't mutter mad messages.** Going around voicing your frustrations (eg. "I am so pissed-off") again winds us up and infect others.
- ✅ **Say what you feel.** This has a calming effect – it gets the amygdala to release 'antidotes'. Using the formula "I feel..." is best.
- ✅ **Find real feelings.** Mostly we use big, primal labels not real feelings. "I'm so frustrated" is surface level – it's a wind-up. Delving deeper, you discover "I was feeling ignored" and the calming effect kicks in.
- ✅ **Express feelings not blame.** Start labelling feelings, stop labelling people (eg. Not "You make me feel inferior" or "You think you're so superior" just try "I feel inferior".) Presenting feelings this way just sparks defensiveness.
- ✅ **Reframe wind-up thoughts.** Replace anger-arousing with anger-reducing ones.
- ✅ **Attend to emotional impacts** you have on people and don't bring bad moods to work and infect others. Be emotionally responsible.
- ✅ **Change your ugly stories.** Bad stories you hold about people breed bad feelings. Good stories breed more healthy feelings and act as a buffer against other's toxic emotions.

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*One final pointer:* Go out of your way to connect with others. Take time to express concern, show empathy, be understanding. Why? Well apart from building relationships, research reveals that connecting might just be good for you. So let's explore connectivity a bit more...

## Connectivity Counts

Connectivity is the urge we all feel to belong, be liked, needed, respected, supported, understood and in synch with people around us. It's a badge of our basic humanity and a telling indicator of healthy team cultures. Connective moments, as Edward Hallowell says, are "*human moments*".

"A human moment doesn't have to be emotionally draining or personally revealing. A 5-minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment. To make the human moment work, you have to set aside what you're doing and focus on the person you're with. Usually when you do that, the other person will feel the energy and respond in kind." Edward Hallowell 'The Human Moment at Work' Harvard Business Review Jan-Feb 1999

*Connecting* is a precondition for almost anything else that happens in interactions you have. It helps in a number of practical ways. For example:

- ❑ Knowing what makes people tick emotionally is essential to work out how to deal with them. If we can read how people feel, we can predict how they might react. This enables us to modify messages or behaviour so we can 'get through' to them better.
- ❑ Reading where people are coming from feelings-wise is at the bottom of good team relationships, getting along well with others and makes good customer service sense too.
- ❑ It's also important if you want to get your own way too. To influence someone, I have to create a connection with them first so they'll trust what I have to say and pay attention.
- ❑ Being able to read what others feel is also part of our own emotional guidance system. We take our emotional cues and make up our emotional minds based on how others feel.
- ❑ Making time for connective moments matters for health and well-being. It has a calming effect on both us and the other person – it's restoring and healing.
- ❑ It also insulates us from toxic emotions, counters the effects of stress by calming

bodily reactions and is a more constructive way to handle hostility and aggression than head-on arguments.

"Research shows connecting may be pivotal in stress relief. Without (it) we are more vulnerable to toxic emotions - both our own and others. (It) has a constructive effect on neurological functioning, well-being, physical health and personal relationships and counters the physiological and psychological harm done by stress." In *Becoming a Resonant Leader* McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston p. 38

## Empathy in Action

It's *empathy* that makes connectivity possible. Connecting is 'empathy in action'. It's not just a sentimental fiction, it's a real brain function.

We're hard-wired to read feelings. Spindle cells and mirror neurons – part of the limbic system – act as an emotional radar picking up emotional 'blips' that help us tune in to others and get on the same wavelength.

In more everyday terms, empathy is reading what others feel even if they don't or won't tell you. It's picking up on where someone else is coming from feelings-wise (even if I don't agree with it).

- ❑ When we're empathetic, we're receptive to other's feelings. The more attentive we make ourselves, the more attuned our radar gets.
- ❑ Empathy enables us to handle feelings with skill, sensitivity, harmony and humour. Those lacking empathy (or rather, choosing not to tune in to their radar) often act in ways that antagonise, upset and grate with people.

Emotions like self-absorption, anger, contempt and disapproval dull our radar and dissipate empathy. If we're too judgemental of someone else, we close ourselves off to what they feel.

Many of us have been warned off empathy. We are told it means a too softly-softly approach or being overwhelmed by someone else's strong feelings – giving in to tears, catching a disabling mood, being flooded by another's panic. This is confusing empathy with sympathy. Empathy is different – though they're connected brain-wise.

We tend not to notice other critical times when we catch an emotion that inspires us, makes us feel determined, gives us a sense of hope, leads us to pull together or gets us out of the doldrums. But that's empathy at work as well!

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Conversation is the medium for connectivity at work. Through connective conversations, we set the tone for, or even create, the culture. With empathy, we can relate to others respectfully, build team spirit, trust, engage others, help people think together and create rapport.

## Practising Connectivity

There are many practices that can make teams more connective. Most important is **listening without criticism**, with judgement filters switched off and with the urge to leap in to say what we want to say, firmly curtailed. Here's a few others:

- ☑ **Presentness:** Being 'present' means making time to ask the extra question or show you care. (Eg. "Tell me more. I've got the time" or "I was concerned you might feel like that...")
- ☑ **Appreciating** someone else's efforts; saying what you value in them or their contribution.
- ☑ **Connecting:** Taking a few extra seconds to connect with what the other person thinks or feels. We call this 2<sup>nd</sup> position. (Eg. "Seems like you feel/think that...")
- ☑ **Showing positive regard:** Unconditionally engaging others with positive regard, even if what they say is blaming or accusatory.
- ☑ **Expressing gratitude** in a genuine way. (Eg. "I really liked how you did that" or "I really appreciated it when you...")
- ☑ **Adopt a curiosity stance.** Wonder what's going on for them and how you can help rather than blame, criticise or judge.
- ☑ **Forgive harsh words** – they're hijacked by strong emotions. Connect with their concern. Ask yourself: "If someone I respected did that, how would I act?"
- ☑ **Be sincere:** Be genuine in the way you express your sentiments and courageous enough to share them. But do it in a way that doesn't offend others.

In cultures characterised by defensiveness and disconnection, dilemmas, divisions and difficulties duly follow. But if enough people begin to practise EI and connectivity in their conversations, whole cultures begin to change – and that's our last link.

## Culture – the EI connection

We are creatures of habit. We develop patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that we see as very personal. We often don't see how the culture we work in has a big influence on these too.

As this diagram shows, culture is composed of collective patterns of thinking, talking, behaving, leading, responding and feeling. Emotions mostly get left out of the cultural equation but these patterns connect to EI in many different ways. For example:



- ☐ Culture can dictate what we think. Beliefs, values and assumptions we collectively hold define a culture.
- ☐ Many are taken for granted so we don't see how the culture tells us what to think, how to treat others and what to value if we want to be accepted as a part of it.
- ☐ Culture can govern behaviour. Cultures have accepted rules or norms that encourage or discourage certain ways of behaving. These rules aren't usually explicit but are unconsciously followed whether they're in line with codes of conduct or contravene them.
- ☐ Different cultures create different emotional signatures too, depending on what emotional patterns a culture encourages or proscribes, expresses or conceals. It may be 'cool' to be cynical, or smart to be disparaging to others.
- ☐ A culture can be characterised by patterns of feelings people most frequently experience in it. People in different cultures experience different undercurrents of feelings that typify a culture – almost like an emotional footprint.

We often remark on what it feels like to work in a culture. Some cultures feel good, others not so good. In fact, many people leave an organisation because they just can't fit in with the culture.

Just as you can do an emotions map of yourself, you can also map the dominant thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns in a culture. One footprint for instance, is the pattern and frequency of positive or negative emotions that reside in a culture. As we said, emotions are catchy: positive emotions energise... negative emotions drain.

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Over time, the recurrence of positive or negative emotional patterns gets embedded in a culture and comes to characterise it. Some cultures seem to breed negative feelings that can spread to create chronically toxic work cultures, dragging down performance. For example:

- People don't connect or support each other. They're dispirited, despondent or hostile.
- Apathy, anger, aggression, anxiety, cynicism, contempt, disrespect or sullen silence set off toxic emotional chain-reactions.
- Disruptive emotions poorly managed erupt in frustration, open conflict, defensiveness, distrust and harsh, critical indifferent or disapproving behaviours.

Constructive cultures, on the other hand, seem to generate positive feelings. For instance:

- Connecting is valued and there are high levels of trust, support, likingness, respect, rapport.
- People are friendly, enthused, interested, happy, focused and proud of what they do.
- Morale tends to be high, people work well together, and they're more creative, less tense and usually far more productive.

## Tips on Tackling Team Culture

Culture affects team performance, productivity, morale and behaviour. That's an awful lot of influence so getting the culture 'right' matters. But there's another reason to be concerned with the state of your current culture and whether it needs revitalising or changing.

Put simply, too many of our workplaces are toxic: they're unhealthy, stressful and poisonous. And that's an awfully good reason to want to do something about cultures that turn a blind eye to bullying and stand-over tactics, or accommodate dysfunctional behaviour and disturbing emotional patterns that literally make people sick.

Here are some tips for *changing team culture*:

- ◆ Have a clear picture of what you want the culture to look like. Start by asking questions like what's not working or how can things be better and different?
- ◆ Hold discussions with the team about what the culture's like now, how people think and interact and what's positive cultural behaviour.
- ◆ By the way, if you say you haven't got time to engage in culture conversations, that says much about what needs to change in yours.

- ◆ Run a culture scan to gather opinions on the state of the current culture and assess differences between actual and desired characteristics – the 'culture-gaps'.
- ◆ Interrogate current cultural reality together. This means tough conversations as to what's really going in your team culture and whether that's constructive or not.
- ◆ Carefully describe the new behaviour and thinking you want to see. What are the core beliefs or operating assumptions now? What new shifts in thinking do you want to see?
- ◆ Identify aspects of the current culture to keep because they line-up with the new cultural direction and ones that don't – eg. silo-thinking.
- ◆ Review how team leaders behave. Is what they're doing supporting the new cultural direction or reinforcing the old?

Stop doing things that run counter to the culture you want. Every day, your culture is either moving more towards or further away from the culture you want. Constructive or destructive behaviours and work practices are reinforced on a daily basis by the systems you have in place right now. Until you get this, you won't do anything about those systems that are reinforcing things you don't really want to reinforce at all.

- ◆ Spell out the new behaviours you want to see and the old ones you want to vanish. Start rewarding the new and making the old painful to hold on to. More tough conversations!
- ◆ Identify culture-building training to provide new conversational, emotional and positive interaction skills to support people to change behaviours and build positive and supportive emotional climates to help them change.

Lack of EI and connectivity undermines cultures and cripples teams, even entire organisations. They're the key differential between good or poor teams and supportive, positive and safe cultures or cold, indifferent and toxic ones.

The Change Forum conducts practical 2-day coaching clinics for leaders and teams who want to learn how to handle emotions better at work and renew or revitalise their work culture. Brochures and information available at

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