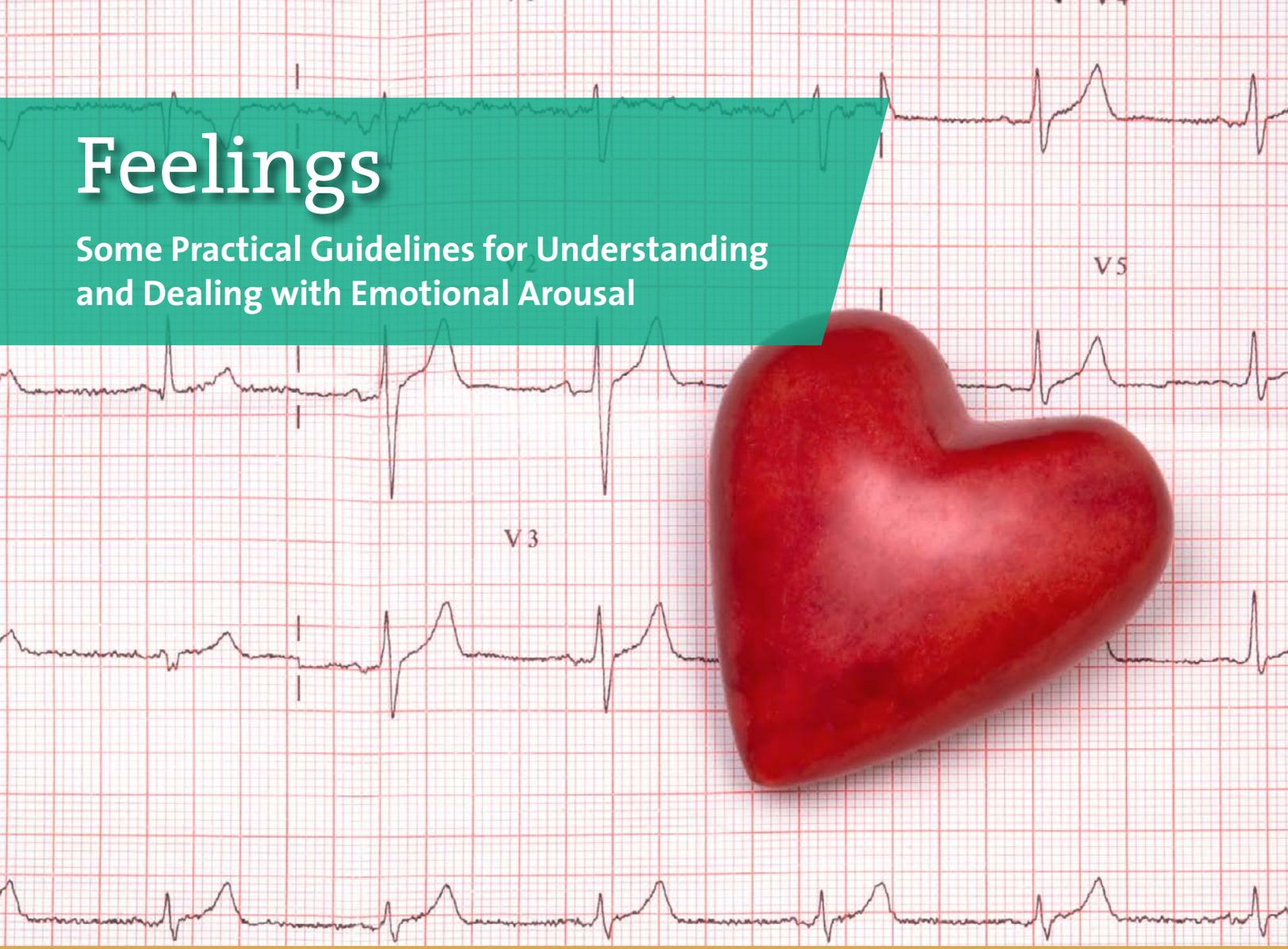


# Feelings

Some Practical Guidelines for Understanding and Dealing with Emotional Arousal



**We all bring our feelings to work and we all take our feelings home. It is not entirely possible to wall off these two areas of our lives; indeed, our work and our personal lives ought to complement and enrich each other. More often, we feel torn between the warring demands of each.**

by Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

# Introduction

**Feelings. We all have them. Our feelings may change from moment to moment and they may be irrational or mistaken, but they exert a powerful influence on our lives. Our feelings color our perceptions of the people and events around us and they precipitate and catalyze our reactions to others. To make matters even more complicated, we may not even recognize how we feel, and we may be oblivious to the impact our feelings have on our lives and the lives of those around us.**

**We all bring our feelings to work and we all take our feelings home. It is not entirely possible to wall off these two areas of our lives; indeed, our work and our personal lives ought to compliment and enrich each other. More often, we feel torn between the warring demands of each.**

**The problem with feelings is that they often don't get the respect they deserve. That is, we give our feelings either too little or too much respect. Many of us view feelings as emotional irritants—weaknesses that are best denied or ignored. They just get in the way of what needs to be done. Others permit their feelings to hold them hostage. These people are at the whim of what they are feeling at the moment. For them, feelings are reality.**

**This essay won't tell you how to feel or how others should feel. It will help you understand feelings—yours and theirs— and what to do about them. If you think feelings don't matter much, reflect on the times that feelings have derailed important projects, disrupted your relationships with others or made you miserable. If you are often paralyzed by your feelings, consider the freedom you would enjoy if you could just do the right thing in spite of how you felt. Here are some practical guidelines that can help.**

## **Take feelings very seriously**

Most of the frustration you will experience in life will be the result of your failure to take feelings into account. Trying to be cute, you will make snide remarks that you will live to regret. You will take early positions and announce premature decisions, and the emotional back drafts these actions will beget will stun you. In fits of rancor and pique, you will say hurtful things for which you will never be forgiven. Feelings are emotional landmines; trip over them and people are maimed, relationships are ruptured and the organizational landscape is changed forever.

When you come to appreciate how important feelings are to your success in life, there are some practical tactics you should embrace and practice. Monitor your own feelings carefully. Be honest with yourself about how you feel and anticipate the impact these feelings will have on your perceptions and attempts to communicate clearly. Ask others directly about

how they feel, accept these feelings as legitimate and take them into consideration when deciding how to proceed. If you deal with feelings up front, it is less likely that they will ambush you later. Feelings are important variables in every interpersonal equation. Ignore them at your peril.

## **Don't take feelings too seriously**

You can attach too much importance to feelings. Do this, and feelings will hold you hostage. Some of us are prisoners of our feelings. We may fear discomfort or rejection, or we may just not feel like taking some initiative. The major reason things don't get done in the world is that we don't feel like doing them. The more you give into your own feelings and the emotional blackmail of others, the more powerless you will become. And your level of frustration will soon ferment and deaden you so that you will give up and drift along mindlessly with everyone else.

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When faced with any dilemma, the goal is to consider carefully all the available options, choose the best option and then implement it straight away in spite of how you feel. While feelings are vitally important and must be considered, our feelings must not be allowed to call the shots. Successful leaders do the right thing in spite of how they feel. Some important person is alleged to have declared, "Most of the work in the world is done by people who don't feel very good." Thankfully, doing the right thing generally makes you feel better.

## **Take the time to identify feelings**

We all tend to bury painful feelings and hide them from others and ourselves. We may be ashamed of how we feel or we may believe that feelings render us weak or vulnerable. Some of us are so good at suppressing our feelings that we honestly don't believe that we have any. People will often deny that they feel a certain way even when the evidence to the contrary is clear to everyone around them. Have you inquired whether someone is upset only to have him protest loudly and indignantly, "I'm not upset!?" Unrecognized feelings pose the greatest dangers. These unexploded emotional cluster bombs undermine personal potential and impede organizational effectiveness. Feelings are always a part of the mix. It is best to face them early on.

You should begin by asking yourself and others about feelings directly. Remarkably, we often miss this step. If we are all busy hiding our own feelings from ourselves—and most of us are—it stands to reason that we might not think to ask others how they feel. It's important to ask with sincerity. If your associates suspect that you are just looking for weaknesses to exploit, ridicule or dismiss, they won't be honest. Who can blame them? But an honest attempt to get all the feelings on the table because they matter will help everyone see what you are up against and whether this goal is worth pursuing. If you are going to offend everyone in the process, you may decide that this is not the hill to die on.

**Others will never admit how they feel, keeping their emotional powder dry for the battle they always assume is coming.**

Here's insight. Some people struggle with what has been labeled "alexithymia," the inability to use feeling words. These folks have feelings like everyone else, but they can't describe how they feel. You must deduce how they feel by the way that they another important react. For example, these folks often complain about physical symptoms when the real issues are obviously emotional. Still others will never admit how they feel, keeping their emotional powder dry for the battle they always assume is coming. These are the chronically angry folk, pitied and avoided by those of us in hot pursuit of joyful lives.

## **Remember to accept all feelings as legitimate**

This is not a natural thing to do. We are inclined to view those who feel differently than we do as stupid, misinformed or ignorant. Their feelings may be ridiculous from your point of view, but if you possessed their sensitivities and perceptions, you would feel the same way. If this argument is not convincing, consider that you will never deal effectively with the feelings that are barriers in your life and work until you understand and accept that those feelings make sense to those who harbor them. You may feel guilty about your own feelings. You may confuse feelings with considered positions, which are very different things. You may become resentful about how your co-workers feel. Then it will be difficult to step back and accept their feelings as reasonable. It will help if you remind yourself that, "Feelings are just feelings," and that, "Feelings are okay." We have all kinds of feelings. It's not what we feel but what we do that matters. Feelings do influence how we behave, but we regularly isolate how we feel from how we behave. When our feelings have been accepted as legitimate, we then feel free to act in spite of them. When feelings are ignored or spurned, they are much more likely to call the behavioral shots. The following statements will assist you in making it clear that you are trying to understand how others feel. "I can see how you would feel that way." "Those feelings make sense to me."

## **Express your feelings and invite others to do the same**

Unexpressed feelings are dangerous. Strong feelings are like steam in a pressure cooker. If you keep turning up the heat without finding a way to vent the steam, sooner or later things are going to blow. Think about it. This happens in our everyday lives. Little resentments add up and we keep them in. Then another minor aggravation occurs and we explode out of proportion to the "straw that broke the camel's back." This is why it is so important to express feelings as they arise. Sometimes talking about these feelings is all

we need to do with them. You may recall the relief you have experienced when you “vented” to someone who has listened sympathetically and nonjudgmentally. It really helps.

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If you and your associates will serve each other in this way, your work environment will invigorate instead of stifle. Since not everyone is this sophisticated about dealing with feelings, you may decide that talking about your feelings openly at work is not the way to go. Since it is still common for others to hold what you feel against you, it is important to find other venues for expressing your feelings. Trusted friends and family members often serve as valuable sounding boards. They will not always be able to remain emotionally detached though, and if you find yourself having to manage their overreaction, you may want to avoid this additional aggravation.

Private writing is an excellent coping strategy. When you are upset about something, write openly about it until your feelings are fully relieved. Make sure that these frustrated musings don't fall into the wrong hands. This is a venting strategy – not a communication strategy.

## **Some feelings are best ignored**

If you have read this far, you can see that these guidelines often appear contradictory. They are. Our feelings are so transient, complex and mutable that no single approach always works. Feelings cannot necessarily be trusted to reflect reality. Most feelings are derived from perceptions and while your perceptions define your reality, your perceptions and resulting feelings may be based on misunderstanding, false information or ignorance. When deciding how to deal with our feelings, it is critical that we take the origins of those feelings into account.

When you have learned which of your own feelings to ignore, you will be more effective in helping others see which of their feelings are best disregarded. Here are some examples of feelings that ought to be purposely put aside. When you become aroused by news brought by a gossip, choke off those feelings as soon as possible. When you are troubled by unreasonable guilt, act as if you didn't feel guilty and that feeling will gradually go away. (When you feel guilty, ask

yourself why. If you didn't really do anything wrong, your guilt is unreasonable. If, on the other hand, you behaved immorally or unethically, then you should respond to this reasonable guilt by confessing, repenting and making restitution where possible.) When an associate goads you with opinions, questions or attacks designed to provoke an angry response, don't go for the bait. Sudden anger is best smothered until time and determination allow dispassionate reflection.

## **Give feelings time**

Most painful feelings diminish naturally with time unless they harden into the chronic resentment that cripples so many emotional lives. Most of us are pretty impatient—both with our own feelings and those of others. We are inclined to ignore them, avoid them or run roughshod over them. When we do face our feelings, we usually expect that now that the problem has been faced we should be able to get on with it. No one who has been deeply hurt is mollified quickly by an apology no matter how heartfelt. Healing takes time. When you are ruminating about some wretchedness in the middle of the night, it is hard to believe that the dawn alone will bring much relief. But it usually does. This realization that the intensity of most of our feelings diminishes over time suggests wonderful strategies for coping with emotional arousal. Be quiet. Don't lash out when your feelings are running high. Remove yourself from the conflicted situation to avoid making matters worse. Don't send email when you are angry. Hold onto that memo you dictated in heat. Don't return calls until you have calmed down. Write a letter making it clear how you feel but don't send it. Sleep on it, several nights if necessary. Now here is an interesting thing. There is nothing particularly complicated about these recommendations. And yet people all over the world ignore them every day. This is a testament to the power of our feelings and to our lack of skill and discipline in coping with them.

## **Recruit feelings to your cause**

You now understand that feelings are the condiments that make or ruin the soup of life. You realize that feelings are both powerful motivators and de-motivators. Perhaps you would agree with Benjamin Franklin that, “If you would persuade, you must appeal to interest rather than intellect.” If you want to achieve some personal or organizational goal, you must find a way to recruit others' feelings to your cause. This ability is the essence of persuasion, an opportunity and a temptation. When you can corral feelings, you can herd human beings in almost any direction. Just because you can doesn't mean you should, though. Selfish persuasion may provide some short-term gain, but long-term relationships are not built this way.

Here are some ways to make emotional appeals ethically. Admit right up front that you are trying to sell your audience. Tell stories that contain emotional hooks. Let your emotion show. Don't be afraid to be passionate. Talk about your own struggle and how you came to believe and feel as you now do.

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Exterminate dangerous feelings  
Hateful, resentful feelings are the termites in your organization's foundation. There are some feelings that can't be coddled or accommodated. This is true in your personal life as well. Our self-destructive urges are frequently the most resilient. Such feelings can be hard to kill. You cannot let go of your death grip on them. When you conclude that you have come across such feelings, this is not the time to be timid or tentative. You must act aggressively to ensure that what is most precious about your life or your organization is not destroyed. These dangerous feelings must be confronted head on. Such feelings always produce disruptive behavior. If they didn't they wouldn't be so dangerous. You must document the destructive behavior carefully and make it clear that it will not be tolerated. When people sheltering nasty feelings are vigorously confronted, their feelings sometimes change. Alas, this is not usually the case. These disease carriers must be quarantined or exiled. This is always difficult, but it must be done if the organization is to survive and thrive.

## **Learn to predict how others will feel**

As you get to know others better, you can predict how they will feel and react in a given situation with a fair degree of accuracy. Since unpleasant feelings of all kinds are barriers to satisfying relationships with others, you will want to avoid doing and saying things that tend to trigger such feelings. Until you can predict how someone is likely to react to your proposal, it is best to tread lightly, taking time to see what potential emotional obstacles you will likely face as your relationship progresses.

If you approach your colleagues with all guns firing, they are likely to react defensively. After that, it's a safe prediction that these folks will emote in the same fashion when approached similarly in the future. This is not the most sophisticated way to learn how others will feel and react, but many of us can't even get these hard-knock lessons clear in our heads. We just keep bulling our way through emotional china closets, puzzled and

annoyed by the shards of feelings that knick us along the way.

Here are some better ways. Listen carefully when people talk about how they have reacted to others in the past. They are likely to react that way in the future. Observe their closest friends. Birds of a feather do stick together. Pose a hypothetical issue and ask them how they feel about it. Watch their facial expressions and body movements. Those bedeviled by sputtering rage usually grimace, twitch and squirm.

## **Minimize your own rumination**

Unpleasant feelings of all sorts promote pointless and painful rumination. Most of us have endured sleepless nights, our minds agitating, frothing resentment like wringer washers. Such painful brooding may persist for some time before we realize that we are victimizing ourselves with this agonizing mental torture. This self-flagellation draws from our worst feelings and spawns more of them. No one can cope very effectively in the context of such misery. You must find a way to decrease the pointless rumination in which you indulge. You must first recognize what is going on. There's a big difference between rumination and problem solving. Problem solving examines options. Rumination assumes there are no options. Those inclined to ruminate cannot usually just turn it off. You must bombard your brain with stimulation that will drown out the rumination. Loud music helps. Vigorous exercise is a powerful and healthy antidote. A hot bath can break the excruciating cycle. Using a rubber band as a reminder bracelet and popping your wrist when you realize that you are ruminating is a simple technique that has proved effective for many.

## **Milk good feelings for all they are worth**

Good feelings are more fleeting than unpleasant ones. They can be brought back to life though, and when recalled, they still have the power to move and inspire us. This is why effective leaders recall past triumphs at every opportunity. Wandering in the wilderness is rendered more tolerable by periodic descriptions of the land of milk and honey.

Forgotten successes and latent memories of passionate inspiration litter our emotional landscapes. These are the greatest untapped sources of encouragement available to organizational leaders. Shared history joyfully recalled will top a motivational seminar any day of the week. This is why telling stories is so powerful. All of us have participated in moments of true greatness, and we all long to recall those occasions. When we do, we temporarily escape the monotony

of everyday life. Of all the opportunities to enlist others' feelings in the pursuit of your goals, these evocative memories are the easiest to exploit and the most often neglected.

## Embrace emotional detachment

Most of us get aroused pretty easily. We have strong feelings, and we feel compelled to share them with others. Even minor perceived insults have been known to trigger deadly fury. Our growing problem with road rage is an example. These ridiculous outbursts are not confined to the dull and drugged. Highly intelligent leaders indulge in temper tantrums when one of the little people takes a designated parking space. We are a people out of control and it is getting worse. This unwillingness to dampen our psychic storms is regularly resulting in unnecessary interpersonal distress at best and deadly workplace and school violence at worst.

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We all need to take our emotional arousal in hand, and we need to do it now. Furious excitement feeds on itself and quickly spirals out of control. If this argument is not self-evident, consider this. In any verbal exchange, the person who is most emotionally detached is the one with the most power and influence in that situation. Consider the wisdom contained in this aphorism: indifference is the only true freedom.

This is a lot easier to talk about than to practice. The first steps are to embrace this concept and make the commitment to develop this critical leadership skill. The next step is to identify the signs and symptoms of your own arousal. Then, realizing that you are hot, you must learn how to keep your mouth shut. You will not be able to hide the fact that you're angry, but at least you can choose to limit the damage by foregoing verbal swordplay. As you get better at this, you will assume the role of analyst and your curiosity about what is really going on here will help to distract you from reacting emotionally to the barbs that are flying. When you have reached this stage, you will deal much more effectively with conflict.

## Try to understand feelings

Feelings are complex amalgams of genetic predisposition, unique sensitivities and learned responses. Though at

times they appear to come out of nowhere, that is never the case. There is always a reason why we feel the way we do. Understanding how or why a particular feeling arose won't make it go away, but this insight can give the feeler hope that there is some order in the internal universe. When less mysterious, a feeling is merely a powerful influence instead of a command that cannot be easily resisted.

Here is the short course. We come into the world with certain needs that are inevitably frustrated. Those frustrations come to mean certain things to us, and we develop certain attitudes about others and ourselves as a result. These attitudes give rise to instinctive defensive behaviors that are triggered automatically whenever we are frustrated in our relationships with others. This continues for the rest of our lives. Our daily coping patterns are therefore both the results of the painful feelings we have experienced in the past and the genesis of the ongoing frustration we feel when the coping styles we have developed don't work as well as we hoped they would.

What is the practical import of all of this? Emotional reactions out of proportion to real or perceived insults (common occurrences in everyday organizational life) are the result of flawed attitudes and behaviors. If you can identify the maladaptive attitudes and behaviors in your own life that are contributing to your constant frustration, you can make some changes that will decrease your level of emotional arousal. If you can see that those colleagues who are lashing out at you are really less mean than they are emotionally stunted, you won't be inclined to take their attacks so personally.

## Give strong feelings wide berth

We all experience strong feelings from time to time. Giving reign to such emotional eruptions can be dangerous. Those who continue to indulge in temper outbursts as adults dismantle the vital relationships in their lives and put others and themselves in harm's way. When it comes to emotional explosions, the more you let yourself go, the farther you tend to go. This eventually results in overt destructiveness or assault in response to relatively minor provocations. When you see that you are dealing with this level of immaturity, it is best to forego attempts to reason at that moment.

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When you see that others are becoming irrational, it is not helpful to goad them or to respond in kind. While their emotional excess is not your fault, it is more important to defuse the situation than to fix blame. "I'm sorry that this issue has upset you so. Perhaps it would be better to revisit this later," is usually an appropriate exit line. Such outbursts should be objectively documented. Neutral observers should be recruited when the issue comes back up. Most people curtail their tantrums when they realize they are being observed.

You cannot permit these folks to behave badly without attaching some consequence to these destructive tirades. Disruptive people who conclude that the threat of a temper fit will get them what they want without a price to pay will continue to behave inappropriately. Leaders must see to it that emotional assaults have a downside.

## **Cut aroused folk some slack (but not too much)**

People say things they don't mean when they are mad. All of us have said or done things in the heat of the moment that we have later regretted. While it is true that you can do lasting damage with any angry outburst, it is important to remember that none of us is perfect and that all of us will need the gift of a fresh start.

How can you decide when to hold the offender accountable and when to grant a second chance? Is there a pattern of overreaction? If so, don't let the pattern become more deeply ingrained. Did the transgressor apologize promptly and sincerely or is the perfunctory apology a ruse to deflect the intention of others to insist on some accountability? What kind of heart does he or she possess? We are more willing to forgive people with big hearts than those who are just out for themselves. We all have positive and negative attributes. Is this person a net positive contributor or a net negative contributor to the team? In the end, cutting the repeat offender too much slack is not doing that person a favor. Tolerated misbehavior, like a foul gas, expands until it is contained.

## **Look for contamination**

Our feelings are complex enough by themselves, but to make them even more challenging to understand and manage, they are rarely pure. That is to say, feelings usually are a witch's brew of animus that springs from many different enmities. Your coworker may react angrily to your constructive criticism in part because he was already annoyed with his wife after a tiff at home. We all haul around some emotional baggage from earlier life experiences and those resentments and regrets are

in the mix too. When we overreact to a given issue, emotional pollution is usually the cause.

Contamination is more the rule than the exception and so you should always consider it. Distracted or absent-minded colleagues are already battling some emotional squall, and opening another door will invite those ill winds in. We all have a tough time separating the person and the opinion. Some folks can sell anything because everybody loves them. Other colleagues raise neck hairs just by raising their hands to ask a question or make a comment. When the atmosphere is already heavy with emotional pollutants, your latest idea is not likely to be considered on its own merits. You would be wise to pick a clearer day.

## **Be prepared for widely varying sensitivity**

Some of us are a lot more sensitive than others. And our individual sensitivities vary from moment to moment. You may have been kidding but those on the receiving end may have felt belittled and humiliated. Identical remarks may wound deeply one day and elicit no reaction the next. Unconscious reactions are sometimes interpreted as intentional slights and those who are convinced that others are discriminating against them attribute the darkest motives to every initiative and offer cynical interpretations for others' best intentions. The boor can't imagine that his own behavior could have anything to do with how others respond to him; when things don't go as he expects, someone else is always to blame.

Faced with the daunting task of coping with kaleidoscopic sensitivities, it is not a question of whether you will trip up but how often and how badly. Keeping your mouth shut is probably the best initial approach, but ignoring difficult issues is neither helpful nor respectful in the long run. When you finally speak up, the way you go about it matters. "May I speak frankly?" is a great opening line. This request for informed consent gives others a moment to prepare. If they give you permission, then they have at least agreed to consider your point of view. If they are obviously hesitant, you should offer to put off the discussion to another time. Asking questions instead of making pronouncements is generally better received. Identifying known sensitivities and making those concerns appear warranted is an effective way to anticipate objections before they erupt unexpectedly. The time you invest in understanding and considering the sensitivities in your environment will pay rewarding dividends in your relationships with your colleagues.

## Learn to let go

By now, you have come across a lot of people who harbor resentments that have become the central issues of their lives. These bitter feelings taint their perceptions of everyone and everything. They walk through the days of their lives with an emotional limp. We all carry some emotional scars and—let's be realistic—some of us have been blessed with easier lives than others. Still, we have all seen those who have survived the most awful brutality and emerged with a genuine and a joyful approach to life. Others have experienced relatively minor frustrations and become obsessed with what they perceive as the awful injustice they have suffered at another's hand.

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When you elect to take a position of leadership in any organization, you are going to take some painful hits. Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "If you treat people right they will treat you right—ninety percent of the time." It is easy to pick at the wounds that others inflict so they never heal. You do not want this to happen to you. Only two kinds of people hurt others—those who are malicious and those who inadvertently cause pain. Pity the former and promptly forgive the latter. Distract yourself with the work that still needs to be done and spend more time with your comrades-in-arms. Adopt and practice techniques for minimizing rumination; it is the dung heap in which resentment mushrooms.

## Know when to give up

Strong feelings can grow hard like the cold ice of winter. Many leaders refuse to give up long after the battle is lost. Every battle cannot be won. There is a considerable difference between persistence and stubbornness. Confuse these, and you will live a hard life.

When you see that your feelings or those around you won't melt or recede, it is important to withdraw before permanent damage is done. You can just admit that you were wrong. That's a novel approach for most of us. You could admit that your timing was bad. You could acknowledge your idea needs more work and agree to study it more. Or you could wait for a bigger hammer. You may have hit a brick wall in suggesting that peer evaluation is the right thing to do, but that same wall will crumble quickly when confronted with the battering ram of a court injunction.

## Conclusion

For organizational leaders, dealing with feelings is a big deal. Feelings—yours and others'—will consume much of your mental energy as a leader. Most of us deal with feelings by the seat of our pants. Some of us try to ignore them. Some of us are paralyzed by them. None of us can escape them. As long as human beings are involved, feelings must be considered. No one has figured out feelings entirely and that is not likely to happen soon. In fact, technology may be making matters worse. All of us who use email recognize how sensitive others can be and how easily misunderstandings can arise.

The best way to approach complexity is to begin simply. These simple guidelines can help. We will all spend our lives trying to get better at dealing with feelings. Those leaders who master these approaches will finish ahead of those who conclude that feelings are just messy distractions, unworthy of serious study and thoughtful action.

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