"If your emotional abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far."

– Daniel Goleman

While we may like to think of ourselves as rational beings, the reality is that our thinking and behavior are powerfully impacted, if not dominated, by our emotions. Books like *Emotional Intelligence and Primal Leadership* (Daniel Goleman) and recent neuroscience research on the brain and learning make a compelling case for the enormous impact of emotions on organizational life and performance.

Organizations have moods. We've all been in rooms of people where there's an almost palpable feeling in the air of something being off, of people feeling discouraged, frustrated, mistrustful, hostile, alienated, or shut down. We have also all been with groups of people who are feeling happy, inspired, connected, and confident. Research has validated what common sense would say: happy and inspired people perform better. Numerous studies have demonstrated high correlation between a positive organizational climate and such key factors as mental efficiency, greater creativity, taking in and understanding information, complex decision-making, and financial results.[1] Organizational climate has been shown to actually account for 20-30% of organizational performance.[2]

Moods are contagious. Through the mechanism of *limbic resonance*,[3] our feelings are dramatically influenced by the emotions of those around us. Our limbic systems[4] "transmit signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular functions, sleep rhythms, and immune systems inside the bodies" of those with whom we are in close proximity[5]. A study of 70 work teams showed that people in meetings enter a state of shared moods within two hours, regardless of how people had individually felt when they walked into the meeting. Limbic resonance also accounts for the enormous impact on organizations of the emotional state of top leaders – 50-70% of organizational climate is determined by the mood and style of its senior leaders[6]. This is one of many reasons we focus so intently on top leadership in the early stages of organizational transformation.

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[1] Isen, Alice, *Positive Affect Facilitates Thinking and Problem-Solving*, in Mansted et al., Feelings and Emotions: The Amsterdam Symposium, p.263-281, NY, 2004.

[2] Goleman, Daniel et al, *Primal Leadership,* Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.18.

[3] *Limbic resonance*: "The capacity for sharing deep emotional states arising from the limbic system of the brain. These states include the dopamine circuit promoting feelings of empathic harmony, and the norepinephrine circuit originating emotional states of fear, anxiety, and anger…a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states." **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_resonance**

[4] The limbic system is a set of related neural structures in the brain that help regulate our hormones and emotions: the thalamus, the hypothalamus, the hippocampus, and the amygdala.

[5] Goleman, Daniel et al, *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business Review, January, 2004.

[6] Kelner, Stephen et al, *Managerial Style as a Behavioral Predictor of Organizational Climate*, McBer and Company, Boston, 1996.

From an interview with a senior non-profit manager:
"Our ED has been a stress case lately. I don't know if it's some personal issue or the fact that we're facing some budget challenges, but she always seems tense. Everyone feels it. I tell myself I shouldn't let it get to me, but her energy gets me stressed, too."

Such findings have propelled the growing field of Emotional Intelligence to the forefront of leadership development. The ability to understand and work skillfully with emotions, one's own and others, is proving to be one of the most important 21st century leadership competencies – a higher success indicator than analytic or conceptual thinking[7].

Today's leaders need to be emotional leaders as well as strategic leaders. Transformational change needs leaders and change agents to help provide fuel by tapping the power of peoples' deep commitment to what they believe – the power of what they love, the power of their utter refusal to accept injustice in all its forms, the power of hopes and dreams for a better life and a better world for the generations to come.

We also need to be able to manage negative emotions. Mistrust of colleagues, competitiveness and jealousy, disempowerment, and anger turned on each other debilitate teams and organizations and undermine efforts to create change. Left unaddressed, negative feelings don't go away; they usually fester and grow. Like a garden, the emotional life of the organization must be well-tended to support the transformational process.

Lastly, while emotions have often been seen as a barrier to clear thinking and good decision-making, they actually have an important positive role to play. We have an emotional brain system located in the orbitofrontal cortex (OFT) that integrates our emotional responses into our decision-making. Studies of fighter pilots, top athletes, and successful entrepreneurs show that information coming from our emotional wiring is indispensable to high performance[8]. The numbers in the budget may add up, the experience and references of the job candidate may be perfect, but we need to learn to pay attention to that nagging feeling that something just isn't right or to the instinct of when it's time for us to say a big "yes!"

Leaders and consultants need to be able to encourage and mine the emotional and intuitive resources of their teams.

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[7] **www.eiconsortium.org/reports/business_case_for_ei.html**
[8] The bestseller *How We Decide*, by Jonah Lehrer, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2010 is a fascinating exploration of the critical role of emotions in decision making.

Challenges to Working with Emotions

1. Avoidance and denial

Many individuals and organizational cultures tend to deny the presence of uncomfortable feelings. Patterns of denial run so deep that people often don't actually know what they're feeling. Even when awareness of emotions is present, leaders are often reluctant to create space for emotions for fear of things getting out of control. Leaders often try, usually with poor results, to smooth over negative organizational moods with positive, feel-good communications. Negative emotions don't improve through avoidance – they get worse.

2. Dominance of negative emotions

A very different kind of challenge exists when, rather than ignoring feelings, overt emotions run rampant through the "organizational limbic system." At the low end of the dramatic spectrum, this might look like the chronic griping and negativity that is endemic in some organizations or a rising tide of general mistrust. Examples of more dramatic forms include unskillful and destructive eruptions of anger or viral epidemics of anxiety (if not paranoia) when peoples' jobs or the organization's survival feel threatened.

3. Beliefs and misperceptions

Our emotions are usually fueled by some content: the stories we tell ourselves about what is happening, the beliefs that determine the meaning we make of "reality." Our pictures of reality may or may not have much correlation with anyone else's "reality," but they are real to us. Someone fails to respond to an important email. We start making up a story about what it means. *"They're not committed,"* or *"they're rude."* We feel frustrated, and start rehearsing the confronting email we're going to send. Groups also fuel their emotions with stories. Staff are angry because *"the management team doesn't respect our input."* Meanwhile, top leaders are angry because *"staff are immature and can't deal with the need for some hierarchy."* People keep running the same stories over in their minds and in conversations, rekindling and fueling their emotions.

> *"I've experienced many terrible things in this life –*
> *most of which never happened."*
> – Mark Twain

4. Triggering

Many of our emotions are normal, understandable reactions to things that are happening. An important work project in which we've invested a lot of energy doesn't pan out and we feel disappointed. Misfortunate falls upon someone we care about and we feel sad. But often, our emotional reactions are way out of proportion to what actually happened.

All human beings carry wounds from our past. For many of us, those wounds are connected to and compounded by trauma and/or systemic oppression. Repeated emotional experiences begin to establish neural pathways – a kind of emotional wiring. Everyone has certain areas of unusual sensitivity – like hot buttons – responses just waiting to be stimulated.

Triggering is when an event in the present activates our emotional wiring.
When we are triggered, our forebrain – our rational, adult mind – is hijacked by our limbic system. The amygdala, a part of the limbic system that registers threat and generates fear, evokes immediate physiological responses such as increased heart rate and more blood flow to the muscles. All of this happens almost instantly, long before sensory information can be processed by the cortex to determine whether or not the threat is "real." Some seemingly minor offhand comment by a leader may trigger a lifetime of rage at authority figures dating back to childhood. A momentary failure to be acknowledged might send someone hurtling into a pit of pain and unworthiness due to existing wounds around feeling unseen and unloved. To others, the provocation may look slight. But to the person who is triggered physiologically and emotionally, their body literally responds as if their life were in danger.

It's challenging to deal with people when they are triggered because they actually are not capable of rational thought. Attempts to explain things or "get through" to people when they are triggered almost always fail. Worse yet, through limbic resonance, triggering can spread like wildfire through a group.

We often see entire teams or coalitions ostensibly arguing about the budget, when in reality, everyone is triggered, re-enacting old dramas and fighting losing battles with ghosts from their past.

The Work of the Change Agent

There are a variety of approaches and tools we can use to meet these challenges.

1. Naming and validating

A foundational practice for working with emotions is simply to name that they are present. Very often, rather than actually being in touch with emotions, people experience intense mental processing: judgment, repetitive anxious thoughts about the future, replaying some unpleasant experience over and over again, self-justification, etc.

Let's look at an example of the members of a management team having heated conversations around the proverbial water cooler about a new plan for restructuring. People are dissecting the ED's psychology, questioning their motives, second-guessing the decision, wondering about where the Board stands. What's driving these discussions? People are anxious, concerned around what the changes mean for their positions, their roles, their standing in the new structure, or simply experiencing fear of the unknown. In the next team meeting, if there is no room for surfacing emotional responses, all this emotional energy may get expressed as very intense, rapid-fire, technical questions about implementation directed at the ED, or people may simply shut down.

As facilitators, the first thing that's needed is to simply name what's going on.

For example: "This is a big change that's been proposed. It would be natural for many of you to be having some real concerns in the face of so much uncertainty. Let's take

a step back from the details for a moment. Big picture, how's it going for you with this change? What are you feeling?"

Several important things to note:

- We not only want to name feelings. We want to validate that people are human beings, and how it's understandable that one might have certain feelings in a given situation.

- People sometimes don't like being told what they are feeling, so it's often skillful
to use words like: *"I wonder if…"* or *"It seems possible."*

2. Expressing and validating

We said earlier that negative emotions don't get better through avoidance – they fester and grow. Before people are ready to move on to a new and better future, they often need to be able to acknowledge and safely express what they feel about the past and the present. Current experience almost always needs to be validated before people are ready to let it go. Naming and validating feelings creates a common framework and permission to attend to the emotional dimension of their group.

We now need to create safe containers and processes for expressing them. Some best practices include:

Invitation

Since sharing of emotions is a-cultural in many organizations, facilitators need to extend a clear and engaging invitation. This may include helping people understand the importance of emotional work for moving forward with the success of the mission to which they are all committed. It is also useful in advance to get the buy-in and support of top leader(s) for dealing directly with the emotions.

Creating space and pace

The sharing of emotion requires a very different pace and format than normal back-and-forth discourse. People need time to self-reflect and to speak without concern
for being interrupted. Because it can be vulnerable to speak about emotions, it's also usually helpful to create a process where people don't necessarily respond immediately to each other but rather speak about their own experience. This circumvents push back, criticism, or advice-giving that can shut down feeling conversations. The use of a talking object[9] can be a helpful ritual to create a different quality of space and time that encourages deeper personal sharing.

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[9] A talking object is a tool for creating in groups a deeper quality of speaking and listening. The object can be anything from a stone or stick, to a small object d'art, a piece of jewelry, or some icon that has meaning to the group. (For example, a forest preservation group I worked with used a pine cone for their talking object.) In this process, only the person who holds the object may speak, while the group devotes their full attention to the speaker. When a person finishes speaking, the object is either passed around the circle or placed in the center of the group for the next person who wishes to speak.

Ground Rules

In order to create safety for the sharing of emotions, it can be helpful to establish special ground rules for these particular conversations. Some possible examples include:

- Speak about your own feelings, rather than about others

- Remember that we don't choose our feelings. They arise out of our unique life experiences. Try to validate (rather than judge) the feelings of others.

- Own your feelings as your feelings (rather than blaming others for "making" you feel something

Given the general lack of skill in most organizational cultures in dealing with emotions, it can be helpful as part of a transformational change process to do some basic training in Emotional Intelligence for leaders and teams.

3. State-shifting

Naming and expressing/validating may be all that is needed to get groups back on track. But change agents also want to master the previously discussed craft of state-shifting: the practice of intentionally moving from being in the grips of negative emotion back to a place of resourcefulness. There are a variety of ways we can facilitate state-shifting:

Move energy

Emotions are physiological phenomena. Our breathing is altered.

The ratio of blood gases shifts. We tighten certain muscles. Hormones are generated and racing through our body. One of the most skillful and dramatic ways to shift energy is through the body.

In our Rockwood trainings we deliver to participants a 360 survey in which their back-home colleagues evaluate their strengths and needs for development as leaders. After people read through their report, they spend some time analyzing the numbers and comments, and thinking about where they need to improve. The training room inevitably starts to feel a bit thick with emotion. Numbers of people get triggered into childhood feelings of not being good enough, of performance being confused with being loved, with frustration at themselves and others. (*"Who the hell gave me that 3!"*) Shoulders begin to slump. People start withdrawing into themselves… It's time to shift the energy. I put on really upbeat dance music. (Just to drive the point home, I often play "I Will Survive.") Few people think they want to dance, but I usually have enough rapport with the group that I can actually get everybody up and we dance all out. At the end of four minutes, it feels like a completely different room. People's energy is back, and they can now turn into dealing more skillfully with their feedback.

Am I saying that the remedy for all those fractious coalition meetings is to get people dancing together? Actually, it would be great! The best way to shift emotional energy effectively and efficiently is through the body – anything that gets people moving and breathing in lots of oxygen. Making noise is an added boost. Dancing! Breathing exercises! Tai Chi or Yoga! I've brought in Zumba teachers as a way to decompress after sessions on structural racism. Understanding how powerful these processes can be, I have learned to be relaxed and confident (and as a result, usually effective)

in getting teams to try some of these "weird" techniques. Transformational consultants need to be creative in finding ways to shift energy to fit different organizational cultures.

Many years ago, I was leading a particularly intense session for the executive team of one of our county's major banks. The meeting bogged down. People were getting very cranky with each other. I asked people to get their coats on. We descended 50 floors in the elevators and walked briskly several times around the long block. Somewhere between the power walking, more rapid breathing, and the cold December air on our faces, energy began to shift. We traveled back up the 50 floors and walked back into the executive boardroom in a much better mood, and ready to tackle the issues at hand.

Reframing

Reframing is not only a tool for shifting mindsets – it can help to shift emotional states as well.

However, before reframing emotions it is critical that people first feel validated. We too often quickly respond to someone expressing strong emotion by trying to tell them they shouldn't feel that way:

> *"See, it's not really so bad."*

> *"You shouldn't take it so personally."*

Sometimes this arises out of our own discomfort in being in the presence of strong emotion. Other times, it's simply a lack of skill. Either way, until people feel heard, these kinds of responses usually cause people to feel misunderstood or discounted.

But if delivered at the right time and with good rapport, reframes can help people shift out of negative emotional states. For example, let's look at one of the varieties of reframing: reframing big and overwhelming situations into just a situation.

Our client, a young ED of a small, fairly new non-profit is feeling anxious and frustrated about the lack of support from the Board.

> *"Board members don't always show up for meetings. Many of them aren't active. They don't help with fundraising. What am I doing wrong?"*

As always, we begin by validating the client's experience.

> *"I imagine that stepping into this new job and not feeling supported by the Board might be really unsetting."*

Once the client feels heard, it might be possible to try a reframe:

> *"Yeah, this Board, like so many other Boards of new small nonprofits, doesn't function all that well. It's not you. It's a common problem. There's some work ahead to do to build a better Board. But you'll get through this."*

Reconnect to purpose

Most people who work in nonprofits have a sense of mission and purpose about their work. At the right moment, calling people to that higher purpose can help people shift out of unhelpful emotional states. Remind people of their collective purpose. Remind them of why they do what they do.

People are bickering about the implementation of a campaign plan. The mood in the room is frustrated, cranky, and generally negative. A possible move to shift energy might be something like:

> *"I get why this is frustrating. But why don't we step back and take a minute to think about why we're doing all this planning? The lives of real people in the community are going to be impacted by what we do or don't do here today. Remember what's really at stake here. How can we come together in this moment to better serve them?"*

Note how we began again by validating peoples' experience. Without this step, people can feel criticized by reframes. And, as with all of our facilitative skills, timing is everything. The same intervention can be met with acceptance or resistance depending on the energy of the moment.

Ritual

Ritual has been used through history as a way of creating powerful shifts in consciousness. We artists of transformational change want to be bold and inventive in creating such rituals for individuals and groups.

A client (individual or group) is stuck and needing to let go of the past or the way things have been. A simple ritual is to have individuals write on a piece of paper (or groups create on a collective drawing) all of the things they would like to let go of. Then, the offering is burned in a ceremonial fire.

Deal with the stimulus

When people are reacting to something in particular, it's always worth considering what, if anything, might be done to deal with the stimulus. This might be as simple as an apology. Also, emotional reactions sometimes represent important information for decision-makers. For example, perhaps staff are worked up about some new initiative, feeling that they don't have adequate time and bandwidth to do it well. After feelings have been expressed, an appropriate response might be to push back the launch date or make room by taking other responsibilities off peoples' plates.

What about when groups are really triggered?

When we're trying to interact with people who are triggered, we are in relationship with a part of the brain that is disconnected from the neocortex where rational thought lives. Our insights will not be received. Trying to talk people out of being triggered is not only ineffective; our good efforts may themselves be triggering. What does work? Deep listening and validating peoples' experiences is always a good first step. Being heard usually helps people feel safer and more connected, which is what people who are triggered most need.

When whole groups are triggered, strong interventions are required by facilitators. Here are some suggestions:

Slow it down.

Use a talking object. Break the back and forth exchanges that are retriggering people. Give folks a bit of psychic space to calm down and to get clearer on what's really going on for them. When triggered, our surface feelings are often protection against

feeling more vulnerable emotions. For example, when people may be hanging out in judgment or anger, these feelings may actually be covering deeper, less comfortable emotions of hurt or fear.

Take a break

Cooling down periods are very helpful for interrupting the cycles of mutual triggering. The break gives people a chance to individually shift states.

Move energy

It's a challenging facilitative move to pull off getting a group that's totally triggered to follow you in a state shifting process. But if you can do it, like the example of the training room after the 360 surveys, collective moods can shift surprisingly quickly.

Training

The most skillful way to help teams deal with triggering is to train them. If you're going to be working over time with teams, teach them about the concept of triggering. Training and practice makes it infinitely easier to help groups self-regulate in times of collective triggering.

All too often we see organizational life disrupted by people, including top leaders, acting out their own emotional needs and creating psychological dramas in public spaces. One of the greatest contributions we can make to organizational life is helping individuals learn to stay centered and balanced in the face of their own shifting feelings. Personal transformation is an important foundation for organizational transformation. The more rigorous and shared the training and practice, the better. Strongly recommended are approaches like Generative Somatics,[10] Forward Stance,[11] Mindfulness Meditation,[12] Jo Kata[13] and the Resilience (State-shifting) practice taught in Rockwood and my own trainings.[14]

Helping leaders develop greater personal awareness and emotional self-management is critical to helping organizations become wholesome work places
with healthy relationships, where mature adults can bring all of their gifts to serve their shared purpose and mission.

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[10] *Generative Somatics* is a body-centered path, methodology, and change theory, by which we can embody transformation, individually and collectively. It is being widely taught to Progressive leaders and organizations through the work of Staci Haines and **generativesomatics.org** and Ng'ethe Maina and Social Justice Leadership. **sojustlead.org**.

[11] *Forward Stance* is mind-body approach utilizing the physical experience to develop, explore, and demonstrate human actions. Developed by Norma Wong and based on Zen practices, Progressive groups are being trained in *Forward Stance* to help shift the way in which they move in the world.

[12] Mindfulness Meditation has its roots in Buddhist practices such as Vipassana and Zen. Popularized by researchers/ practitioners such as Jon Kabat-Zin, it has been actively introduced to activist circles by teachers such as Angel Kyodo Williams and centers like Spirit Rock and Vallecitos.

[13] Jo Kata, a practice done with a wooden staff known as a "jo," comes from traditional Japanese martial arts and is part of Aikido training. It's used developing self-awareness and for embodying new skills and qualities. **sojustlead.org/resources/jo-kata-videos**

[14] The practice of State Shifting taught in Rockwood Trainings was developed by Robert Gass and Judith Ansara. It is a four-step process specifically designed to help people effectively manage their own emotional triggering. It has been taught extensively both to leaders, organizations and couples in committed relationships. **sacredunion.com**

4. Coaching

Some emotional work is simply too vulnerable (and often inappropriate) to occur in front of others in work settings. As consultants, we find that a lot of "heart work" needs to happen one-on-one, through formal or informal coaching. In addition to coaching top leaders, it is useful for change agents to identify additional "emotional leaders" – irrespective of formal organizational roles – whose emotions seem to especially impact the collective limbic system of staff. These might be highly sensitive types, the "canaries in the coal mine" who tend to feel things first and strongest. There are sometimes also charismatic team members whose emotional energy transmits strongly to others. We can help shift the collective climate by focusing our coaching on those key nodes in the emotional network of the organization.

5. Unleashing positive energy

In working with emotions, our job is not only to help deal with difficult emotions. In order to support transformation we also need to help unleash the power of emotions like joy and passion.

Purpose and vision

Connecting with purpose and vision is not only important for alignment – it is one of the most important ways to evoke positive emotions in organizational transformation. People come to this work because they care about the mission. Any activity that helps remind people of that purpose helps generate positive energy.

> "The last time I went to Ohio for a strategy session, I had the pleasure of participating in a house meeting with twenty-five low-income and working class people. As we went around the table, people spoke about how the economic downturn had personally impacted them. Witnessing their suffering and pain touched me in a way that statistics never could. But it was also being inspired by their resilience and the incredible caring and generosity they offered to each other and those who were even worse off than themselves. Very different from the strategizing, managing, raising money that we spend most of our time doing. I felt sad, angry, and joyful all mixed together. This connection with why we do the work – it's the taproot for all good change in the world. If you lose connection with that taproot, your energy for the work withers."

– Deepak Bhargava ED, Center for Community Change

It is a best practice to include as part of meetings and conferences a chance for staff to engage directly with what makes their work meaningful.

Celebrating success

People love to win. There is great joy in feeling like we are making a contribution. Organizational transformation can be a long, sometimes arduous journey. As change agents, it's our job to help break down big change goals into achievable milestones. We want to help our clients take lots of creative opportunities to acknowledge, honor, and celebrate both individual and collective successes. Groups get very creative in their celebrating successes.

- Progress Now, a network of 21 state-based communications hubs, offers their "Bang for Your Buck" award to their affiliate that demonstrates the most effective activity done for the least amount of money (the prize is a big fake buck head made of cardboard to hang in the office). And in the spirit of encouraging risk-taking and innovation, they also offer a large stuffed penguin to honor the most interesting idea that "didn't fly."

- Change.com gives three awards on their weekly all-staff calls: the "Lil' Slugger" award for all-around awesomeness; "Press Star" for great communications work, and the "Science Club Award" for testing, innovation, and interesting use of data.

- At the Center for International Environmental Law, organizational successes are celebrated by the whole team ringing together a large antique Indian bell.

Fun

I remember an amusing moment in consulting to a well-known community organizing group. The staff, as part of its change process, wanted to inject more positive energy into their rather demanding work. They came up with the idea of "Fun Fridays," where they would end work at 4:00 and spend a couple of hours sharing fun activities. They brought the idea to their leader, a respected icon in the world of community organizing. Looking completely bewildered, he repeated the word several times. *"Fun?... Fun?..."* Then he looked at me, *"Is this for real? What does fun have to do with community organizing?"*

In fact, there is considerable research linking "fun" at work with greater job satisfaction, lower stress, and increased trust.[15] Employees feeling joy has been demonstrated to be a prime factor in employee engagement and successful business outcomes.[16]

Many Progressive organizations experiment with different ways to have fun together, such as Karaoke nights, annual chocolate chip baking competitions, mini-golf in the hallways of the office, Friday afternoon beer and games of monkey barrels, laughing yoga, movie and bowling nights, fun Skype chats for remote offices with tons of emoticons and links to funny pictures.

As change agents, we can help create fuel for organizational transformation by encouraging the fun factor.

Emotions are a form of energy. When emotions are suppressed or unexpressed, energy gets bottled up. We need to create safe, positive outlets so that emotional energy is released and becomes available to power our collective greatness.

Transformational work with Emotions is capable of producing collective breakthroughs from frustration or indifference to inspiration and commitment,
from anxiety or mistrust to confidence and faith, from confusion to clarity, and
from discord to unity.

Our work on ourselves

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[15] Karl, Katherine and Peluchette, Joy V. "Managing workplace emotions: Do building trust and workplace fun work?" Faculty of Commerce - Papers. Jan. 2005.
[16] **media.gallup.com/DOCUMENTS/whitePaper--Well-BeingInTheWorkplace.pdf**

A foundational principle in all transformation work is best expressed in the now-famous quote from Gandhi, "We must be the change." This applies to us as change agents, no less than our clients. Our ability to facilitate dealing with the emotions of others is completely dependent on how well we know and are comfortable with our own emotions.

Early in my career I worked with the dying and trained hospice workers in caring for the terminally ill. I remember watching a nurse who had clearly heard my lecture on the importance of encouraging patients to express their emotions. The words she spoke to her patient were, "*It O.K. It's O.K. to cry. It's O.K. to let it out.*" However, her stiff body and tight, uncomfortable voice tone were clearly communicating, "*But not on my shift.*"

Much of emotional communication is nonverbal and can't be faked. Our limbic system and our attention to sensory cues have the capacity to continually feed us information about our emotional environment. But to varying degrees, we are more or less attuned or desensitized to these cues. As practitioners, we want to be committed to ongoing development of our own emotional antennae and empathic abilities. Above all, we need to develop our personal comfort with engaging with the full range of human emotions – anger, joy, sadness, and fear – in others and in ourselves.

Our emotions can be a great ally, but only if we're aware of them, and can maintain some witness. In the work we do there are plenty of opportunities to get triggered. You're facilitating an important meeting that starts to blow up. A client angrily and publicly accuses you of being insensitive to issues of race or gender. You bring in a sub-contractor who "steals" your client. A long-term client change process in which you're deeply invested seems to be unraveling.

Quite a few years ago I was President of a consulting company specializing in whole system transformation with major corporations. One day, I was called into the office of the Executive Vice President in charge of managing our relationship. Usually a fairly soft-spoken guy, he was clearly quite angry. *"I've never seen such sloppy, unprofessional invoices in my life! I don't know if we owe you three million dollars or a million dollars. Frankly, I'm starting to wonder if your company is cheating us. I don't feel like paying anything."* Shoving towards me a stack of invoices, he said, *"Just look at these and tell me what you think I should pay."*

I felt panic rising in my gut. I actually had some trust issues myself with the senior consultants running the account. My company was very vulnerable as this engagement represented 40% of our revenues. I looked over the invoices and felt even worse, as they were in awful shape.

Triggering may happen in the middle of a client interaction.

The method we teach for triggering is a four-step process:

Step I   Name it (notice you're triggered)

Step II   Take space appropriately (don't act when triggered)

Step III   Shift your state

Step IV   Deal with situation (from a resourceful place)

My protective mechanisms were frantically doing calculations and internally screaming, *"If we don't collect at least 60% of this I'm going to have to lay people off."*

Step I. Name it
Fortunately, I was sane enough to know that I was currently insane.
I named to myself that I was seriously triggered.

Step II. Take space appropriately (don't act when triggered)
I asked the client if I could take a few minutes to further review the invoices
before responding.

Step III. Shift your state
I appeared to still be looking at the invoices. But I was actually working at shifting my energy. I took some deep breaths. I remembered that I cared about the man sitting across from me, and that we had established a pretty strong partnership and trust over the last couple for years. I remembered that I wasn't dying. I breathed some more. I gradually started to calm down.

Step IV. Deal with situation (from a resourceful place)
I reflected on the situation from his perspective. He had every right to be shocked and dismayed. Though angry, he was also speaking to me face to face and asking what I thought he should do. A clear insight presented itself to me. We had a good history as working partners. I did not want to be in an oppositional relationship with him around this.

When I finally responded, it was with surprising clarity and ease saying, *"I completely agree. These invoices are terrible. If I were you, I'm not sure I would pay anything. John, here's how I want to handle this."* I gave him back the invoices and said, *"You pay whatever you think makes sense. I remain committed to making sure you and this company are successful. If you choose to pay us absolutely nothing, we'll still show up to help you."*

He took the bills. A long pause. Then he smiled and handed me back the invoices. *"You just did the one thing that could have kept us working with your company. I trust you. Review these invoices. The fact is, the documentation is s--t, but you've delivered great results for us. Whatever you confirm is valid work, we'll pay."*

(Great outcome! The only downside – payment was conditional on me personally stepping in to be the account manager.)

We as change agents are human beings. There will undoubtedly be times when we get triggered in client situations. Our developmental pathway as practitioners is less about not having triggers and more about a discipline of awareness and acting when triggered. It's about bringing ourselves with increasing grace and speed back to our resourceful, centered self.

> A student of Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art Aikido, once asked his teacher, *"Master, how do you stay centered all the time?"*
> To which his celebrated teacher replied, *"Oh, I'm not centered all the time. I simply recover faster than before."*

Emotional intelligence, shown to be a key success factor for organizational leaders, is indispensable for artists of transformational change.