



Emotional Balance: A Make or Break Skill for Leaders

By Dan Goleman

The head of marketing at a global food company pounced on anyone who wasn't up to his standards. He'd fly into a rage and yell at anyone who disagreed with him. Behind his back, his direct reports complained about working for such a terrible boss.

What that marketing executive lacked was emotional balance – **the ability to keep disruptive emotions in check, to maintain effectiveness under stressful conditions.** With emotional balance, you find ways to manage your emotions and impulses. You stay calm and clear-headed under stress, even during a crisis.

Self-Management is a Balancing Act

I call this crucial [leadership competency](#) *Emotional Balance* because it requires a balancing act between **two key parts of the brain.** One is the executive center, the brain's boss, where we make decisions, plan and learn. It's located behind the forehead in the **prefrontal cortex.** A superhighway in the brain runs from that area to the emotional centers, roughly between our ears, where the **amygdala** is the brain's radar for threat.

The amygdala constantly scans to see if we're safe. If it finds a threat, it hijacks, or takes over, the prefrontal cortex. During that period, the amygdala tells us what to do. We aren't planning or learning. The amygdala gets a very fuzzy picture of what's going on. It would rather be safe than sorry, so it makes snap judgments. It directs us to actions or habits that are overlearned, often from childhood and no longer appropriate.

When your amygdala takes over, you have a very strong emotional reaction, a rage or fear, maybe going numb. The reaction is very quick. Later you think, "I wish I hadn't done that, it just didn't work."

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Page 1

Why Balance Matters for Leaders

Cognitive science tells us that the more upset you are, the less able you are to focus on what's important, take it in deeply, or respond nimbly. An emotional hijack sabotages your ability to make good decisions or to react skillfully. Also, emotions spread from group leaders to group members. Research done at the Yale School of Management shows when the group leader is in an upbeat mood, people in the group catch that mood and the team does better. Similarly, a leader's negative mood causes team members to become negative and their performance to plummet.

Does it matter if a boss blows up at an employee? You bet it does. Research shows that employees remember most vividly negative encounters they've had with a boss. They remember it much better than the positive encounters. After that encounter, they felt demoralized and didn't want anything more to do with that boss.

How to Develop Emotional Balance

The good news is that when the amygdala starts to have an emotional impulse, it sends the signal to the prefrontal cortex, which more often than not can manage it well. It can say, "I don't have to get angry or be afraid right now. I can do something more productive."

Here's one way to strengthen your ability to manage your disturbing emotions. **Deploy self-awareness.** Notice when you're starting to lose it, and then intervene. Intervene on the spot. That means not just realizing I'm going to have a hijack, but knowing what to do. This takes practice. Practicing, training your body to calm down. Practicing telling yourself to reframe what's going on so you understand the situation in a way that doesn't hijack. Training yourself to be able to stay calm under crisis and stress. There are many methods for that. Deep relaxation, [mindfulness](#), meditation, as well as being able to talk back to thoughts you have that tell you it's a crisis.

In my upcoming video series, [Crucial Competence](#), my friend and colleague, [George Kohlrieser](#) said,

"We did research with over 1,000 executives from around the world, CEOs, Board members, top leaders, about the characteristics of the best leaders. The number one response is the ability to stay calm and collected. In a crisis, being able to manage your own emotions and stay calm, be able to create this island of security and not spread your tension around."

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