

# Put your feelings on the line

The uncomfortable truth is that emotions are critical to both personal and business growth

Writing  
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**W**hen businesses grow, so must their people. Growth is related to the emotional intensity of our experience, however. This is why, after decades of decrying emotion, it is time we recognised it as fundamental to success. Those who run towards, rather than away from, emotional discomfort will grow at a faster pace.

It is common to focus on strengths and goals when attempting to achieve strategic change. Indeed, refocusing on strengths often generates a good outcome and is likely to be the low-hanging fruit of any change project. Yet weaknesses can often give more interesting signals than strengths, precisely because they indicate an absence of strength. Weaknesses are often accidental, but it is only acceptable for an aspect of your business, or leadership team, to be weak if there is genuinely no strategic need for that aspect to be a strength.

Weaknesses are normally accompanied by a negative mindset, both within a person and within an organisation. If the weakness is within the chief executive, it may constitute a blind spot. It won't

be a blind spot for the chief executive's team, but since team members will often struggle to tackle it, they will be reduced to talking behind their leader's back. If leaders are aware of a weakness, they may become self-conscious and stressed when the weakness is tested, which heightens incompetence.

## Weaknesses in action

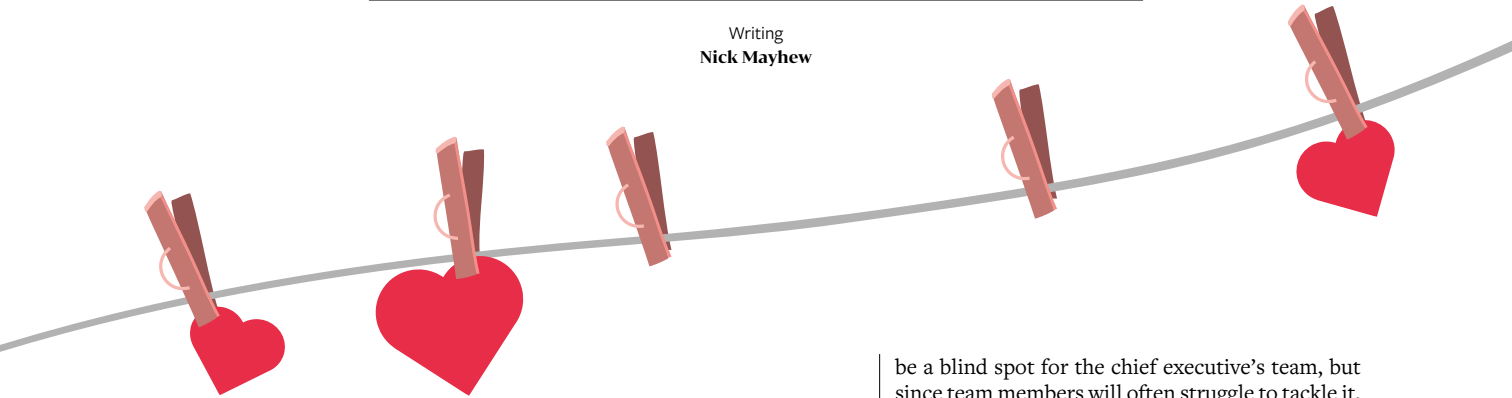
We worked with a chief executive who was frustrated because he was not getting what he wanted from his human resources (HR) director. What he could not see in himself, but was plain to others, was a tendency to tell the colleague what her problem was, in a critical and patronising way.

Understandably, the HR director felt bruised by these encounters, which normally took place in front of board colleagues. Other board members lacked the emotional and social skills to intervene, and tended to bow their heads when these encounters took place. The chief executive was a strong character, but both egos were involved, as is always the case with a lack of respect.

This is a classic problem arising from a leader having poor communication skills and a lack of self-awareness. Because emotion had kicked in, the chief executive and the HR director had only to think about each other to start feeling negative emotions. Two barriers needed to be overcome:

**1** Both executives didn't want anyone to know how they were feeling, so they tended to stone-wall the problem.

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© EMOTIONS AT WORK

How we think has an impact on how we feel, and vice versa. That's why the ability to manage emotions is key to releasing the untapped potential in your team and implementing organisational change. It is also essential to set clear goals that are

desired enough that people are prepared to go through the pain of overcoming their weaknesses and learning the change.

We recently worked with a leadership team that was doing well and had members who were supportive of one another. An area for improvement, though, was the team's tendency not to criticise, which hindered higher capability.

Neuroscience shows that mind and body are deeply entwined, so when we do new things, especially in an emotionally resonant way, we are rewiring our brains and deepening our memory. The trick is to create emotionally engaging tasks, and then practise them. Presenting is a great way to do this since it

captures the bodywork involved in powerful persuasion, and most of us find it both an essential business activity and a challenge.

We asked the team members to use their own presentations as models for practising techniques to get more emotional

power by learning how to bring the physical traits of feeling into communication without losing control. Everyone found a range of techniques, once critical revision and practising repetitions became a norm for the team. By stepping into discomfort with

positive emotions and beliefs, team members learned rapidly.

Mastery of emotional leadership is a step towards helping others achieve the same. Figure 1 (left) is our 'emotional leadership' tool. It counterpoints levels of emotional engagement with capability in self-awareness/choice. Self-awareness/choice capability is a complex phrase, however. It is used to define someone who reads emotions well and is deliberate in making choices, even when gripped by strong feelings. Such is its rareness that it is more often achieved in a group than by a single person, usually in an environment where trust is high and truth can be easily spoken and heard.

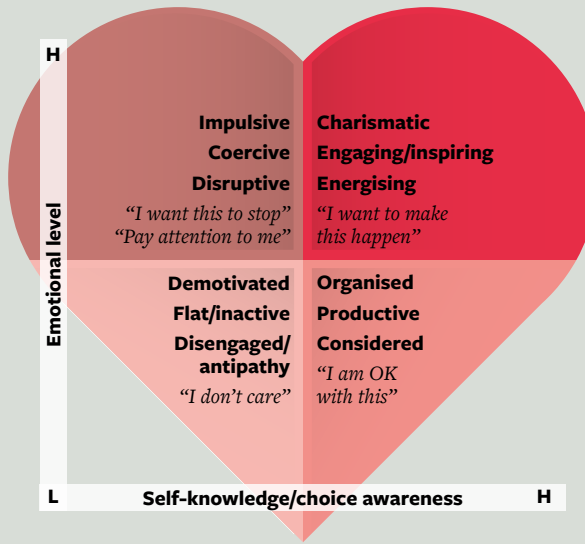


Figure 1: Emotional leadership  
Note that no quadrant is labelled 'unemotional' or 'no self-knowledge'

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2 Both executives needed to be willing to identify and air their negative feelings so that those feelings could lose some of their power.

Once those barriers came down, the problem remained challenging, but at least it could be tackled pragmatically. Leadership is about building the intimacy and trust that allows people to drop their guard. For this reason, the long-term solution to the problem was to build emotional intelligence skills into the leadership development programme.

Yet there was also a need for a quick fix. In this case, the short-term solution was to get both executives to commit to improving the bad relationship and to put in the necessary work to change themselves. Once that agreement had been gained (we call this essential step 'the psychological contract'), then the coaching was relatively straightforward.

A series of difficult conversations took place, with a coach on hand to help when the executives got into difficult territory and needed to keep negative feelings at bay. Once they had created a mutual solution and learned how best to be with each other, the final step was to deepen the trust between them through practising harder tasks together. This final step brought essential emotional power back to

the relationship, in a way that was channelled on both them and the business. Performance quickly improved, and positive feelings increased.

If the weakness lies within the company organisation or strategy, a similar negative mindset can prevail. Leaders may attempt to outsource the problem by employing a consultancy or technology company to transform the business, or try to solve the problem by making new hires, even though these people are unknowns. None of these solutions involve leaders facing the challenge themselves, and rarely do such initiatives work.

We all have the potential to solve our own challenges. So the best way for leaders to help their organisations to grow is to face weaknesses head on, step into the discomfort themselves, and encourage the team to help, so they all start learning anew. That's why, if you want growth, you need to take off the comfort blanket or pour on more fuel. As a leader, you should always be looking for the next challenge to take you out of your comfort zone and keep your learning and development going. To learn, you must be ready to take leaps of faith. ■

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