

Controlling your emotions

Controlling your emotions is a critical skill for leaders. How well you control your emotions influences your effectiveness as a leader, your personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. This ability is a function of your emotional intelligence (EQ).

This post is about how you manage two of the components of EQ: *Awareness of your emotions* and *How you react to and manage these emotions*¹. Awareness always comes first – you can't control your emotions if you're not aware of them.

Recognising your emotions

Both positive and negative emotions stem from your thinking. What you think is how you feel – and act. Let's focus on what you feel. Emotions are felt primarily in your body. The physical reaction triggered by these emotions is the warning sign to you that you may lose control. Your reaction is the flight and fight mechanism caused by the release of adrenalin: Muscles tighten, breath is held and anything from agitation, frustration to fear and anger rapidly follows. It is like an emotional hijack; your brain's frontal cortex shuts down and logic, caution and control go out the window.

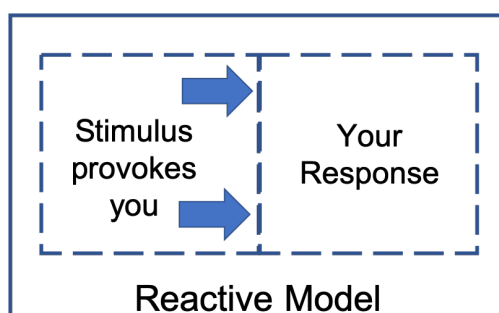
The stimulus

The stimulus is an at-risk situation which triggers an emotion. To be in control of your emotions you need to recognise these situations which include fatigue, deadline pressures and too few resources to get your job done.

In these situations you are at risk of losing emotional control when...

- You work with individuals who are inexperienced, lacking in confidence, not fully competent or not performing to expectations;
- There is role conflict with a colleague, and you are stepping on each other's toes causing duplication and wasted time and effort;
- You are reporting to someone who is trying to prove themselves, by withholding your authority to make decisions or taking credit for your work; and
- Tough performance discussions with direct reports are necessary and being forthright is regarded as being insensitive or aggressive.

Another at-risk situation occurs when your deeply held values and beliefs are offended. If your *shoulds* and *musts* – 'It *must* be done this way' or 'It *should* never have happened' – are violated strong emotional reactions are likely to follow. When you are in – or when you anticipate getting into – one of these at-risk situations, the first step is to recognise the stimuli, i.e. triggers, that might result in an uncontrollable emotional reaction by you.



This is depicted in the Reactive Model in the diagram showing there is no gap between the Stimulus that provokes you and your Response. In other words, you react in a knee-jerk manner without pausing to consider how you are feeling or think about your options.

Your behaviour has occurred in the moment. You have raised your voice, become agitated, used aggressive body language, shown irritation or indicated a lack of empathy and compassion. You are intolerant and impatient; you lack perspective and you've lost control of yourself – and the situation.

¹ The other components of EQ are *Your ability to empathise with the other person* and *How you manage their needs and influence their feelings*.

The result of this loss of emotional control and the behaviour that follows have significantly adverse consequences for yourself, the other person and those around you.

Consequences for others

The other person feels literally attacked, put down, embarrassed – especially if this occurs in public. Their self-esteem is threatened, confidence undermined, and they feel unfairly treated, singled out and not understood. In some instances they report feeling psychologically and physically unsafe. You have offended, alienated and traumatised them.

Consequences for you

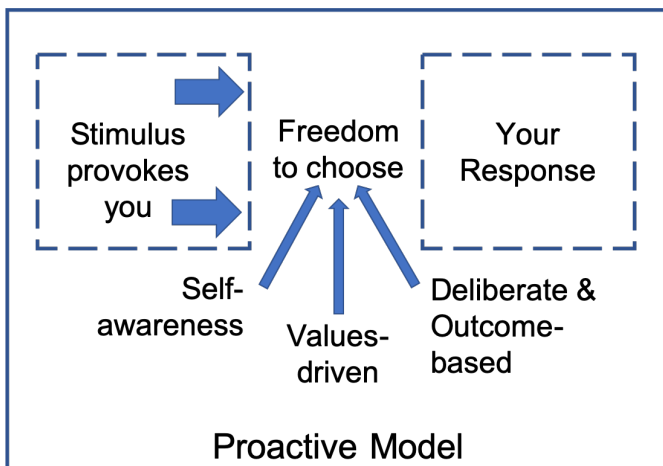
When you lose emotional control in these situations you harm yourself physically by escalating your distress, you make matters worse, you lose dignity and respect and seldom get the outcome you seek. Time and energy are wasted. Your reputation as a leader takes a knock, your executive stature and authority are lessened. You may be passed over for promotion or overlooked for membership of a task force. Colleagues are reluctant to work with you and you have difficulty attracting and retaining staff. Moreover, you may land up being accused of bullying and subjected to disciplinary action, however unfair this may be.

The consequences can be devastating, so learning to manage these situations and, where possible, avoid getting into them is a critical skill for all leaders.

Managing when you're in a situation

The Proactive Model highlights what to do. Learn to stop in the moment. Create a gap, a space, between the Stimulus that has provoked you and your Response. In doing so you give yourself time to pause, to get in touch with your thoughts and feelings, and to choose how you are going to react.

To do this, follow the steps depicted in the model:



1. Develop self- awareness – Know what you are feeling. Tune into your body, recognise the physical manifestations of your emotions, positive and negative.

2. Get in touch with your values and deeply held beliefs – If you value respect, compassion, empathy then let these values be the driver your behaviour. Don't allow them to be compromised by situational variables. Be a values-based leader.

3. Pause to contemplate what you are thinking – Promote a logical response by identifying the outcome you want from the situation. Then deliberately choose what you need to do to achieve this outcome.

In conclusion

Listen to Stephen Covey, *Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our successes and failures, from the [Seven habits of Highly Effective People](#)*

More resources on this topic

My post [EQ, not IQ, makes a great leader](#)