

It may seem a bit odd to think of “emo” in business. We usually associate the cultural slang term “emo” with a genre of emotionally-charged music for 17-year-olds who wear black and don’t smile. Anyone who deals in customer service, however, has on occasion dealt with emotionally charged individuals who aren’t smiling. (Perhaps they’re even wearing black!) Sometimes, those emotionally charged customers affect our own emotions and often in a negative way. One way of learning to deal with such situations is to gain an understanding of emotional intelligence.

The science of emotional intelligence offers insights into ways to effectively manage our own emotions and influence the emotions of others. The proponents of emotional intelligence believe that your emotional intelligence is more important than your IQ in predicting future success.

Emotional intelligence has become quite a buzzword in business and pop-psychology circles. It is a popular academic pursuit, but also popular as a personal path of introspection and growth. From a practical standpoint, I prefer to think of emotional intelligence as emotional maturity.

Regardless of the labels you choose to apply, emotional maturity can be boiled down to three basic concepts or abilities:

1. The ability to understand and respond appropriately to emotions within yourself and others: This means that you understand what’s happening with your own emotions and the emotions of others, and respond in a way that achieves the desired outcome.
2. The ability to control your own emotions: This means that you have developed methods of controlling how you feel and how you respond to your own emotions to achieve the desired outcome.
3. The ability to influence the emotions of others: This means that you have learned ways to say or do things to influence the emotions of people around you to achieve the desired outcome.

Gradually, as we live and experience different people and situations, we develop methods of responding to those people and situations. Sometimes, we learn how to deal with people and situations by watching others such as our parents, teachers, respected friends, or celebrities. Sometimes, we read and study how to react to various people and situations. Often, our responses are shaped by a combination of external influences and things we read and study.

Think of the various encounters you've had with people recently. Are you always able to identify the emotions that people are feeling from their facial expressions? How about their body language? Often, we can identify others' emotions from facial expressions and body language. It's important, however, to note that such physical cues are not always accurate. For example, it's a somewhat commonly held belief in the United States that people who don't look you in the eye are hiding something or being deceitful. In certain other countries, looking someone directly in the eye is a sign of aggression and polite people will avoid it. The point is you have to consider many factors in making decisions about what another person is feeling. A good way to gather information about the other person is to listen to what they're saying. Ask questions and give them a chance to say what's on their mind. Combine what they tell you with what you observe.

Once you're able to recognize and identify emotions in others, you're ready to work on responding appropriately to those emotions.

Think about how you have responded in the past to emotions in others such as anger, hostility, sadness, jealousy, excitement, pride, nervousness, or skepticism. Now, think about whether your past responses were the best way to deal with these emotions in others. Go through the emotions again and try to identify better ways of dealing with people in those situations. You see, as in every other aspect of life, developing emotional intelligence is a journey; not a destination. If we work on it, we can improve it.

How can you control your own emotions?

The term "emotional labor" was first defined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display". A good example of emotional labor occurs when a server in a restaurant smiles and expresses positive emotion toward diners.

It's easy to be pleasant and positive when you're already in a good mood or when you're dealing with people who are also pleasant and upbeat. Your challenge comes, however, in being pleasant and positive when you don't feel well, when you're stressed because of personal or work issues, when you're hung over, or when the other person is stressed, argumentative, or generally unpleasant.

Although there are many techniques that can be used to control your emotions and your responses to others' emotions, author and psychologist Daniel Goleman suggests one short

term and one long term solution. First, the short term solution: Perhaps as a child you were taught, when angry, to count to 10 before doing or saying anything. Good advice. Today, in dealing with kids, there are programs called social/emotional learning. One of the programs uses a stop light metaphor. The kids are told, when they're upset, to remember the stoplight:

1. Red: Stop, Calm Down, Think Before You Act
2. Yellow: Think of a Range of Things you Can Do
3. Green: Choose the Best One

So, the short term solution is to pause and calm yourself before you react, then consider the range of possible responses, and choose the best one.

The long term solution is meditation. Studies have shown that, after as little as eight weeks of meditation, physical changes take place within the brain that help you respond more calmly and appropriately to stressful situations. Meditation doesn't require that you isolate yourself on a mountain top in the Himalayas. There are many forms of meditation including one where you sit quietly with your eyes closed and focus on your breathing for eight minutes a day. Search the web for more information on the myriad forms of meditation. The point is to find ways to generally calm yourself.

In my own life, one of the lessons I've learned is the importance of taking my time. I've learned to pause before I react. That gives me time to calm myself in stressful situations. It doesn't need to be a long pause, but when I'm calm, I make better decisions. I've learned to allow extra time to get to my destinations. That gives me time to wait for slow drivers, raised drawbridges, and slow freight trains without stressing. I've learned that time, appropriately used, is a great source of calming. When I'm generally calm, I'm better able to deal with the stressful situations of business. Perhaps not by coincidence, I've noticed that as I have learned to use time appropriately, my overall stress levels have gone down and I feel happier and more content.

The great news is that, unlike traditional I.Q. which most experts feel is fundamentally unchangeable, your emotional I.Q. is something you can work with starting today. You can mold it, improve it, and begin to see the benefits almost immediately.

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