

The Four C's of Emotion: A Framework for Managing Emotions in Organizations

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of emotional intelligence has gained popularity in organizations today. Emotional intelligence focuses on individuals' recognition of, and response to, emotion. To help individuals better use their emotional intelligence capabilities, this paper offers a framework for interpreting emotional triggers in the environment. The Four C's of Emotion help individuals identify whether issues associated with context, challenges, communication, or community are the underlying causes of their emotional reactions so that they can better deal with their feelings.

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Eighty to ninety percent of [leadership] competencies are not cognitive. For any top executive ..., there are never more than two competencies that come out in the cognitive areas as distinguishing outstanding performance. ... All the rest are what we call emotional intelligence.

Interview with Richard Boyatzis (Wheeler & Hall, 2003, p. 66)

It is no wonder that emotions and emotional intelligence are gaining a foothold in organizations today! The ability to effectively manage our emotions may very well be the key to success in our ever-changing 21st century environment. Emotional intelligence addresses competencies for recognizing and managing our own and others' emotions. These competencies are vital for leaders; they are also important for anyone who is engaged in social activities because emotions serve as the "social lubricant" (Callahan & McCollum, 2002) for interactions between individuals. Despite the importance of these emotional intelligence competencies, emotional intelligence does not place emotion within the broader context of the organizational environment. This article presents a framework for interpreting events in the organizational environment that will allow individuals to better manage their own and others' emotions.

When dealing with organization development interventions, it is easy to recognize the emotions that swirl around issues of change. We hear of disappointment, fear, and skepticism (Loup & Koller, 2005); we hear of excitement and anticipation (Kiefer, 2002). There are other triggers within the organizational environment, however, that may cause emotional reactions that could derail organization development efforts. Understanding the nature of the emotion triggers within the organizational environment makes dealing with feelings more tangible and more effective for organization development interventions.

Emotions in the workplace

Much of the current interest in emotions in the workplace is based on the popular concept of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence gained popularity as a counterpart to “cognitive” intelligence. The majority of work regarding emotional intelligence can be found in the popular literature, largely spurred on by Goleman’s (1995) book, *Emotional Intelligence*. Emotional intelligence is grounded in Thorndike’s early 20th century concept of social intelligence. Salovey and Mayer (1989), the researchers that coined the term “emotional intelligence,” began publishing in the area in the late 1980s. They define emotional intelligence as “a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1993, p. 433).

According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence has five basic categories of ability: knowing one’s emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions, and handling relationships. These domains represent abilities—an individual may have the ability, yet fail to act on that ability. In this sense, both the definition and the categories lend themselves to the traditional conception of intelligence as a type or types of ability (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Goleman (1995) suggests a series of action steps that can help us engage emotional intelligence in the workplace:

- Reflect on and recognize your own, and others’, emotions.
- Accept responsibility for your emotions.
- Reframe negative situations to challenges.
- Learn your own triggers for both positive and negative emotions.

- Ask, “What can I change?” whenever confronted with an emotionally-laden situation.

While these action steps provide insight for applying emotional intelligence, they focus only on the individual and, to a certain extent, interpersonal relationships. These steps do not help us narrow down the vast array of environmental stimuli that act as emotional triggers. What we need is a framework that helps us make sense of these emotional triggers so that we can more effectively apply our emotional intelligence capabilities.

Environmental Triggers: The Four C’s of Emotion

Boyatzis claims that we must begin to look at the organization of the future as a social system (Wheeler & Hall, 2003), filled with emotion, reason, and action. Social systems models help us better understand our organizational environments so that we can make sense of the emotional triggers that either support or derail our organization development efforts. The Four C’s of Emotion is a social systems approach to categorizing potential causes of emotional responses in organizations. It is based on a classic social systems approach that categorizes general organizational actions into four primary clusters (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000). When mapped to emotion in the Four C’s of Emotion, these four clusters include context, challenges, communication, and community.

These four categories of actions represent those areas in which emotion is likely to be triggered, making it easier for us to identify the source of our emotions. Once we can identify the cause of an emotional trigger, we can make better choices about how to

address the resulting emotions. These better choices may serve individual interests by resulting in such benefits as promotions or improved working relationships. These better choices might also result in such organizational benefits as reducing turnover or increasing customer and client satisfaction.

I. Context

All social systems must pay attention to the *context* in which they are situated. In other words, they need to be able to take actions that help the organization adjust to its changing environment by obtaining information and resources from the external environment. For example, benchmarking is the quintessential activity focused on scanning the external environment for information to improve processes within an organization—to watch what others are doing in order to make adjustments to achieve success. Any types of information searching, from surfing the Internet to chatting at social gatherings, would constitute a context-oriented activity. Socially-responsible community outreach is an example of taking steps to better understand and work with the external environment (Biereima & D'Abundo, 2003). Another example would be networking with individuals from a variety of fields, disciplines, organizations, and countries to expand the knowledge and resource base within the organization.

These activities are filled with emotional implications. Bringing in best practices of competitors may be seen as threatening to those who have a stake in existing organizational processes. Activating social networks for information requires that individuals establish rapport, and even friendship, with a potentially wider pool of

colleagues. Proposing changes based on new information gathered may be met with resistance and fear or anticipation and excitement.

II. Challenges

The classic definition of an “organization,” dating back to late 19th and early 20th century explorations of the concept, is that it is “a goal-directed collective” (Banner & Gagne, 1995). All organizations must, therefore, identify a set a goals, or *challenges*, that serve as a unifying force. As organizations create an action map for how to achieve these challenges, they might focus on activities associated with training, leadership, and strategic planning.

For example, mindful attention to ensuring that learning outcomes from training programs are actually transferred to the workplace is an activity designed to help organizations meet their goals. Activities associated with developing new leaders for the organization—including targeted development programs, coaching, and mentoring—is another set of goal-oriented initiatives. Leadership development is what provides the organization with skilled leaders who can help the organization better mobilize its resources to achieve goals. Planning activities would also be considered appropriate as achievement activities. Scenario planning is one method to engage organizational resources toward achieving future goals; strategic planning sets the stage for overarching organizational goals. An overlooked type of activity associated with finding and tackling challenges is reflection in and on action (Schon, 1983). Reflection is what fuels decisions about choices for taking action.

Frustration is a common emotion tied to transferring learning to the workplace; it can be hard to try something new in a climate that has long-standing habits, and it can be equally frustrating to have untested new ideas threatening to disrupt existing processes. Being selected for leadership development training can be met with pride and excitement; not being selected might result in resentment or disappointment. Jockeying for position in strategic planning efforts can lead to anger, confidence, frustration, hope, and a host of other emotions. Taking time for reflection may be seen with skepticism in a fast-paced environment.

III. Communication

In order to function effectively, all social systems must establish formal and informal means of *communication*. Communication is the key to bringing everyone together in an organization. The formal and informal sharing of information creates a feeling of being part of something bigger by creating links between people and processes in an organization.

There are a wide variety of activities that foster communication. For example, learning networks help employees engage in lifelong learning that is structured in relation to work activities and, thus, allows multiple organizational stakeholders to share in knowledge development and management (Poell, Chivers, Van der Krogt, & Wildemeersch, 2000). Another way to foster communication among parts of an organization might be through team-building workshops and activities. Even cross-training and job rotation are examples of communication fostering activities, because they help ensure that employees gain information about different tasks beyond their own

job responsibilities. Perhaps the best example of communication activities are all of those things that directly influence sharing information—establishing employee break areas that are comfortable retreats for informally sharing information, hanging creative informative bulletin boards, or creating and maintaining listservs and intranets.

But, communication activities are among the most emotional in organizations (Callahan, 2000)! Communication can trigger jealousies among co-workers, fear of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person, burnout from receiving too many memos and e-mails, excitement about collaborating with a colleague, anticipation about learning new tasks that may further individual employee goals, and more. These are but a few of the potential emotional responses to a wide range of communication activities within an organization.

IV. Community

Finally, all organizations have a sense of *community* or some set of beliefs and norms that bind members together with a collective history. We might think of this as the culture of an organization—including all the rituals within the organization, common practices, unofficial or official dress codes and all of the other assumptions that guide how we are “supposed” to interact in an organization.

Some more explicit activities associated with creating community might include offering orientation sessions for new employees to socialize them into the organization (Reio, 2000). Another way to foster a collective sense of identity is through development, sponsorship, and display of corporate art (Nissley, 1999) to suggest to both members and outsiders what the organization believes is an important indicator of their collective

values. Corporate museums, a component of organizational memory, are fast gaining a reputation for serving as a strategic mechanism to transmit a desired image to members and clients (Nissley & Casey, 2002).

The emotions fostered by activities associated with community may include fear, hope, alienation, belongingness, and guilt, among other emotions. Fear and hope might occur as individuals anticipate getting involved in community activities—will I be accepted? If orientations fail to socialize an individual into the community or if the individual cannot find ways to assimilate into the culture, feelings of alienation from co-workers may result. A strongly socialized individual who resonates with messages of community is more likely to feel a sense of belonging in the organization. Those who break the implicit or explicit rules of the community might feel guilt or shame.

Emotion Problem Solving Guidelines

A strong sense of emotional intelligence and an understanding of the Four C's of emotion provide the foundation for effectively managing emotions in organizations. Once the foundation is solidified, we can then enact an action plan for solving dilemmas associated with emotional reactions.

- *Identify the feelings.* Use your emotional intelligence to not only understand and name your own emotions, but also to understand and name the emotions that others might be feeling in the same situation. For example, when you are left off the e-mail distribution list for a project of great interest and importance to you, are you angry that you've been overlooked? Or, perhaps, you feel fear that you've

lost an opportunity? Or, perhaps you feel concern for your colleague who might be feeling overwhelmed and has simply forgotten to add your name?

- *Identify the cause.* Consider the Four C's of emotion—context, challenge, communication, or community—and identify which might contain the emotional trigger for the situation at hand. For example, you've just accepted a position in a new organization. In your attempt to meet your new colleagues and establish relationships, you've called many of them to have a conversation and perhaps meet them for lunch or coffee. No one has returned your calls; you are feeling hurt, alienated, confused, and perhaps a bit irritated or even angry. When the IT staff finally gets your intranet working, you discover that you have twenty emails welcoming you and asking you to lunch. Is this a communication issue? Or a culture issue? Perhaps it is about a communication culture in which email is preferred for communication over voicemail.
- *Identify the potential futures.* Take the time to consider the consequences of either expressing or not expressing the emotions that you might be feeling. For example, what might happen if you decided to suppress your anger? How might your health suffer? Are there ways to express your anger in such a way that your concerns are heard in a positive light? For example, perhaps you could ask questions about the issue to highlight the root cause of your anger. As in the example of the e-mail distribution list, by asking the sender with genuine concern why your name did not seem to appear on the list, you might discover that your initial anger is displaced by embarrassment that your name *was* on the distribution list but that your spam filter redirected the e-mail. If you choose to simply go take your

frustrations out on a punching bag at the gym, you might discover that others are angry at you for not responding to those messages that ended up in your spam folder!

- *Identify the best option.* After identifying the potential futures of various options of expressing or not expressing your emotions, select the option that will yield the best outcome for you.
- *Act on that option.* Once you know what to do, do it!

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence helps people better develop their own capabilities for dealing with feelings in the workplace. The Four C's of Emotion help place those emotion-related capabilities within the *context* of the workplace. This framework helps people read the environment to identify the potential triggers that could derail their ability to effectively work with their emotions in their best interest. The combined power of the competencies of emotional intelligence with a framework to make sense of the emotional triggers in the environment prepares individuals to effectively manage their emotions in the workplace.

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