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Rituals to the Rescue - Emotional Intelligence at work

We live in a world that constantly bombards us with situations that evoke extreme emotions. And every extreme emotion triggers an impulse, almost as automatic as flicking on a switch. How can you deal with such impulses?

Emotions are like your mother-in-law! They want to control everything. And unfortunately, very often they succeed. But jokes apart, emotions are extremely powerful, and can even hold sway over our intellect. That is why we hear people say “I was just so overcome with fear/sorrow/anxiety that I couldn’t think straight”. Rational thinking, which weighs the facts of a situation, looks at pros and cons and right or wrong, is carried out by the intellect. And, then whoosh, there comes an emotional storm that shatters our carefully constructed logical arguments, as well as our self-restraint — leaving us feeling out of control and angry with ourselves.

A river can flood its surrounding areas and cause immense damage. But when the same river’s power is harnessed by building a dam, it nurtures fruits, flowers and fields, provides food for hungry stomachs, and quenches parched and thirsty throats. In exactly the same way, we need to understand how to harness the power of our emotions. That’s what emotional intelligence is about — our ability to identify and understand our own, as well as other’s emotions, and manage them effectively.

Let’s understand this better with an example. Madhu’s colleague Akhil didn’t complete his task on-time, and since Madhu’s work depended on Akhil’s work, she ended up missing the deadline. Madhu decided to give him a piece of her mind and stomped across to his office. Akhil got agitated with her angry voice, and retorted that he had hundred other things to do. But before they both realized, some unpleasant words got exchanged, and Madhu found herself walking back to her seat in a fretful mood. The stress hormones coursing through her veins made her breathe rapidly. Her forehead was sweaty, her fists tight, and her blood pressure was up — all she wanted was to smack Akhil hard in the face. The river of her emotions unleashed



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a furious flood, causing a lot of damage — both to herself, and to people around her. For the next couple of hours, Madhu was not able to concentrate on anything. Her bad mood persisted even when she reached home, which eventually made her unable to spend quality time with her family.

The morning after, her first thought was about the spat she had. She lost out on productivity of the previous day, which would continue to some extent today. Also, now the conflict will manifest subtly with

both of them avoiding each other, or being passive and uncooperative — all of which will amount to more delays, stalemates, and eventually a loss in productivity.

This is an all too common scenario, which many of us may have experienced at work. Let’s rewind this incident and closely examine the trigger point — that exact moment when “all hell broke loose”. The instant Madhu realized that Akhil hadn’t completed his task, something exploded inside her. This explosion was actually the signal that her mind was giving her that the situation threatened her work reputation or credibility. Her body produced a lot of stress hormones to help her cope with this “perceived” crisis, and triggered an impulse to fight with Akhil. Madhu got hijacked by these hormones and the impulse to fight. THIS is the moment she has lost control on herself. Our inability to restrain our impulses leads to such situations, where we are almost a prisoner of these impulses.

Now let us analyze how Shanti (an emotionally intelligent person), would have acted in Madhu’s situation.

Shanti is mindful that she is working on a critical project, and her stress levels can easily ride up if she doesn’t watch them closely. She has created a particular ritual (a specific sequence of steps/actions taken) for herself when she is faced with destructive impulses. No matter how strong the impulse, she follows through with the ritual, and it helps her. Mindfulness allows her to be consciously aware of the moment a destructive impulse has birthed inside her.

Shanti’s ritual to cope with provocation

Step 1: Self Counseling: The moment she comes to know that Akhil’s work is delayed, she sees the red monster of “provocation” dancing all around her, invoking her rage. For a couple of minutes, she can’t

see anything other than the red flames of provocation, and she knows she has to counsel herself to get her sanity back. Here are the messages she gives herself:

“Shanti, you’ve dealt with provocation earlier. You know that it reduces in intensity when it is starved of energy and attention.”

“You are very angry right now and not in control of your emotions, and if you confront Akhil right away, you are very likely to say or do something that you will regret.”

“You have to allow some time to pass so that the emotional storm can settle down, and then you will have a better handle on things.”

Step 2: Move physically and distract yourself: Shanti is well aware of the mind-body connection, and knows that the stress hormones in her body are pushing her to physical action. The best way to release these trapped hormones is to move. She gets out of her office, walks down a few flights of stairs, and gets out into the fresh air. She consciously spends 10-15 minutes walking around, letting the surroundings distract her senses.

Step 3: Drink water: The stress hormones are dehydrating her, so her ritual includes having a glass of cool, refreshing water. She is also aware that water reduces stress levels, so as a practice, she drinks 2-3 liters of water every day.

Step 4: Empathize: She’s feeling slightly better now; the red flames of provocation have reduced in their intensity. Then she tries to see the situation from Akhil’s point of view – proverbially trying to walk in his shoes. Maybe, there are genuine reasons for the delay. She will know that only when she has a calm discussion with him.

With every step in the ritual described above, Shanti is building up the walls of the dam that will contain the force and fury of her emotions, preventing them from flooding over. This dam of emotional intelligence helps her conserve her energy, so she can work out the right way to channelize it. The storm has passed and the river’s fury has subsided. Shanti now feels in control of herself, and more confident of having a discussion with Akhil. She has successfully harnessed the power of her emotions, and can now release the water from the dam in a calm and controlled way.

She decides to address the issue. She politely asks Akhil about the delay, gives him a patient ear, and then shares with him the impact the delay has had on her work. Regardless of the reasons for the delay, or whether Akhil is a habitual procrastinator, or how Shanti will fix the

lapse, she has successfully avoided an ugly confrontation, which would have caused more damage.

The most important point is that she is in control of herself, which means that she is unlikely to say or do anything which she will regret later. She may need to have a difficult conversation with him. And, she is definitely in a better state of mind to do that. Ugly confrontations have to be differentiated from difficult conversations. In the first one, there is a lot of venting out, and at least one person has lost control and will later on regret and wish that

s/he had handled things differently. Difficult conversations are very important conversations but they are not about venting out, rather they have a very precise purpose, are managed sensitively yet firmly without losing control over oneself. They are difficult, because the stakes are high, causing emotions to run high. They are important because not having them will lead to significant losses (tangible or intangible).

The negativity unleashed by provocation causes huge damage at workplaces, followed only by the dysfunctional impulses generated by temptation

Madhu and Akhil’s situation is a simple example. Reality maybe far more complex than this. Different people and situations may need longer “cooling off” periods. Some situations maybe very pressing and demand an immediate response, where the luxury of “cooling off” is not available.

Even then, we stand to gain if we have a well-defined ritual in place to manage our destructive impulses. Over time, the ritual will become second-nature, and we may even reach a stage where something that provoked us a while ago, doesn’t do so anymore. And that is because the ritual has strengthened our automated responses to provocation.

One can create one’s own unique ritual which one can practice if faced with provocation. This can include listening to music, talking to a friend, sleeping over it, or even eating some ice-cream (without piling on the pounds), just about anything that works for you. But, create a specific sequence of steps that you will follow when you feel a destructive impulse rising up within you. Create a ritual that will help you release the stress hormones from your body, and buy time till the emotional storm has passed.

Impulse control is at the heart of emotional intelligence. Destructive emotions in the workplace cause huge losses in productivity — one, due to the heated exchanges themselves; and second, due to the lingering changes in our biochemistry. The stress hormones that are released take time to get flushed out of the body, and till they are circulating, we remain in an agitated state. We don’t snap back into a peaceful state of mind as soon as an altercation is over, the agitation lingers on.

We live in a world that constantly bombards us with situations that evoke extreme emotions. And every extreme emotion triggers an impulse, almost as automatic as flicking on a switch. Provocation and temptation are two huge monsters lurking around us, waiting to catch us at unguarded moments to rake up destructive impulses inside us. The negativity unleashed by provocation causes huge damage at workplaces, followed only by

the dysfunctional impulses generated by temptation.

An emotionally intelligent person has an astute understanding of these monsters and knows exactly how to take them by the collar, handcuff them and pin them to the ground so they become powerless. But it is in our power to create a little haven of calm within, even as our emotions threaten to spiral out of control. So make a start with creating your own unique ritual for coping with provocations, and come what may, follow through with it. This is an investment in yourself that will surely give you great returns. 🍷

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GULSHAN is the Founder of Infinituz Consulting, a human capital consulting practice that focuses on behavioral skills training, HR strategy, OD, leadership development, executive coaching, performance management and HR process consulting. Gulshan has an MBA from MDI, Gurgaon, and holds an Honors degree in Economics from Lady Sri Ram College, Delhi University. She has 15+ years of work experience in roles ranging from HR business partner to Leadership Development expert and head of Human Resources.