

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, PAPER TIGERS, AND PAUSE BUTTONS

By Robyn Remotigue and Laura Letbetter

Renowned lecturer and science journalist Daniel Goleman is widely credited for bringing the concept of emotional intelligence to the general public and to the business world. His 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* remained on the New York Times bestseller list for a well over a year, and there are five million copies in print in numerous languages. His article “What Makes a Leader?” is highly recommended reading for leadership courses and seminars, including those organized by NCURA. In this definitive article, Goleman describes emotional intelligence as “the sine qua non of leadership” (p. 3), and he defines and describes each of its five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (p. 2). Three members of the NCURA Leadership Development Institute class of 2010 provided an overview and their personal insights on the five components of emotional intelligence in the September/October issue of this magazine. In June of 2012, eight members of the NCURA Executive Leadership Program (ELP) Class of 2012 participated in an emotional intelligence workshop led by Susan Dunlap of Susan Dunlap & Associates. Dunlap directed the group’s attention to Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer’s definition: emotional intelligence is the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions. How one can use this information about emotions in an important question for research administrators.

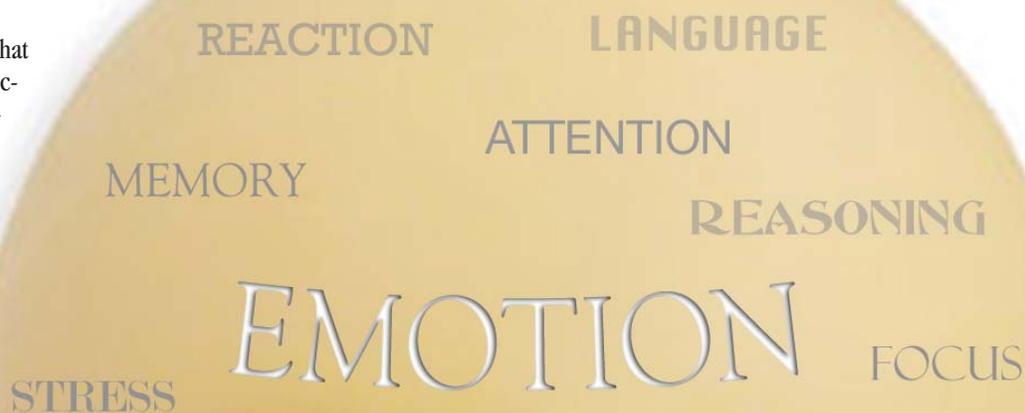
Research on emotional intelligence indicates that it can have a far greater impact on being a successful leader than IQ or technical skills. Research also indicates that emotional intelligence can differentiate between an average leader and an exceptional leader. According to Goleman, “If your emotional abilities aren’t in hand, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can’t have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far” (qtd. in Hughes, 2004). This statement should resonate with

research administrators. We work in a charged environment. Ideally research is an objective endeavor, but in real life, it is riddled with emotion. Applications, proposals, and contracts can be risky ventures for principal investigators. Their careers and their sense of self-worth are often at stake. Our own careers and sense of self-worth are predicated not only on what we know and what we can do, but also on whether PIs, colleagues, supervisors, and sponsors *believe* we know what we are doing. Trust between PIs and research administrators is essential, and emotional intelligence is the key to building trust.

If it is intuitively obvious as well as supported by social science research that our technical abilities, cognitive skills, and competencies just aren’t enough, then what gets in the way of our exercising and developing our capacity for emotional intelligence? The answer to this question may lie in how human beings are wired. There are specific reasons why we sometimes react to stress as though we are not ourselves. Dunlap (2012) offered the ELP class several examples: a person whose normal state is to be a considerate, good natured team player may under stress become possessive, detached, stubborn, or insensitive. A person who is normally pioneering, assertive, and positive

may become abrasive, arbitrary, controlling, and opinionated. A colleague who is normally considered to be knowledgeable, thorough, and diplomatic may transform into a perfectionist who is hard to please and defensive. The outgoing, persuasive, or inspiring individual may seem overly confident, a poor listener, or a self-promoter. Dunlap asked us to consider what could explain such extreme transformations. She then introduced the concept of *amygdala hijacking* and how it impacts us at work. The term comes from Goleman’s 1996 book, *Emotional Intelligence*. The amygdala is an almond-shaped mass of gray matter in the anterior portion of the temporal lobe of our brain. Its job is to process our emotional reactions and survival instincts. The neocortex, located on the outer surface of the cerebrum, is in charge of higher functions such as language and memory. In a 2011 interview, Goleman explained in lay terms how amygdala hijacking works:

The amygdala is the trigger point for the fight, flight, or freeze response. When these circuits perceive a threat, they flood the body with stress hormones that do several things to prepare us for an emergency. Blood shunts away from the organs to



the limbs; that's the fight or flee. But the response is also cognitive—and, in modern life this is what matters most, it makes some shifts in how the mind functions. Attention tends to fixate on the thing that is bothering us, that's stressing us, that we're worried about, that's upsetting, frustrating, or angering us. That means that we don't have as much attentional capacity left for whatever it is we're supposed to be doing or want to be doing. In addition, our memory reshuffles its hierarchy so that what's most relevant to the perceived threat is what comes to mind most easily—and what's deemed irrelevant is harder to bring to mind. That, again, makes it more difficult to get things done than we might want. Plus, we tend to fall back on over-learned responses, which are responses learned early in life—which can lead us to do or say things that we regret later. It is important to understand that the impulses that come to us when we're under stress—particularly if we get hijacked by it—are likely to lead us astray.

Dunlap asked us to consider how the amygdala is perfectly designed for activating our response to a saber toothed tiger, but far less helpful in the 21st century workplace! The amygdala hijack is common in every level of the research administration environment. You receive notification at the last minute that a proposal is due on a day you asked off weeks ago, and the PI is a college dean. Hello, amygdala! You spend hours developing a detailed five year budget that includes a team of 22 faculty, only to find that the lead PI has manually overwritten every formula in your spreadsheet. Can you feel your cortisol level rising? In response to deadline pressure, you submit a multidisciplinary proposal minus one dean's signa-

ture, with the understanding you have approval to move forward, only to learn later that that dean has significant issues with the submitted proposal and is unwilling to sign off. Now your amygdala is going off like a rocket! Venting to a colleague may provide some immediate relief, but the price is that you are spending precious time doing something other than working the problem.

The trick is to find a way to give your neocortex a chance to catch up. How many times have you wished your life had a pause button? Not only so you could enjoy the wonderful moments, but so that you could have that extra moment to think about how to respond in a high pressure situation? As research administrators, we need to be mindful of what triggers our emotions and identify strategies for redirecting ourselves from emotional reactions. It is important to remember that we do actually have pause buttons at our disposal; we just need to find them. Think about what sets you off emotionally. Is it when someone doubts your knowledge or interpretation of a program or policy? Is it a late breaking email insisting upon an unreasonably last minute proposal submission or contract deadline? Is it when a PI assumes you must be an unfeeling bureaucrat who doesn't care about science? A perceived lack of disrespect for one's time, experience, intelligence, or humanity is a big trigger in academia and in the research administration environment. Simply acknowledging what upsets you and what can help you find potential pause buttons. Dunlap suggests easy meditation by taking three deep breaths or a quick walk inside or outside your office. You may be on a tight deadline, but you will save time and improve relationships by taking a moment on the

front end. One ELP member suggested the use of a mirror at your desk so you can keep watch of your facial expressions while taking a phone call! Learn to smile more at yourself in the mirror. Turn off your light for thirty seconds and then turn it back on again, visualizing the light as a reset button. Naming your emotions by keeping a journal is a time tested method. Another ELP member suggested writing words and thoughts about how you feel at the moment and then throwing them in the trash to symbolize your mastery over those feelings. Dunlap even suggested pinching your finger during times when you are triggered, a Reiki technique for increasing awareness and management of your emotions. Whatever technique you choose, the idea is to find a way to buy yourself enough time to allow the thinking brain to catch up, to recognize that *there is no tiger*. Then your next steps can be directed by your neocortex and not by your amygdala.

Finding the pause button is an act of leadership. When you redirect yourself from a potential amygdala hijacking, you are also defusing the situation for the person who initially triggered you. You will find yourself spending less time venting and more time doing what you do best, as will those around you. We are more valuable to our PIs, our colleagues, and our institutions when we are able to master our own emotions. Many of us would like to fine tune our self-awareness. Like learning to play the cello, speak another language, or interpret OMB circulars, it takes practice. Self-mastery is a lifetime journey, a process rather than an event. Knowing a paper tiger when you see one is a good starting point. ■

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