

from the desk of

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Understanding Emotions in Inquiry

By Matt Rawlins ©

What is the difference between these two statements about John?

John is feeling good about the job.

John is encouraged and optimistic about the job.

The second sentence gives you more specific information about how John feels about the job. With this, you have greater clarity to understand how he is doing.

Understanding emotions adds to the quality of our relationships and thus gives us a capacity for a richer, fuller and more successful life. Emotions form the conduit through which much of the beauty of our life is enjoyed. They are, in a sense, the glue that holds or breaks up clear communication. If we are to understand how to ask questions, we must now turn to understanding emotions.

Imagine a renowned pianist walking unto the stage in a large concert hall. He is dressed in black tuxedo with tails. He bows to the audience and then walks over to the piano and flips his tails over the seat and sits down. He lifts the cover off the keys and there are only eight keys on the keyboard. He then lifts one finger and plays his music with just the one finger. He is good, in fact he may be brilliant, but the limitations are such that he cannot touch the depth and beauty of his potential in bringing forth the music with such limitations.

Many of us are like this pianist. We have only a few classifications of emotions and everything must fit through them to be understood. In its most basic form we say a feeling is either is good or bad. If we are more daring we may use words like fear, love, hate, joy, happiness and sadness. That may be it. That is the range of our understanding of our emotions and the limitations are very similar to the one-fingered pianist on an eight note keyboard. Imagine how hard our pianist would have to work to produce beautiful music with only eight keys and one finger.

Understanding and working with emotions are important parts of asking questions and thus human leadership. The more we understand our emotions, the better questions we can ask. The better questions we ask, the better leaders we become. For example, how would the four emotions below give you more information than just the category of 'good'?

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I am: satisfied - happy - thrilled - ecstatic

Depending on the emotion, you might ask different questions and you would clearly know more about the person and their job from hearing more specifically the emotions going on in them.

The most effective questions are full of, sensitive to and often dripping with emotions. Yet, if we run all emotions through the limited categories we have given them, we will never master the art of asking questions. You must use all the keys on a keyboard and all of your fingers to truly learn to play the piano. So it is with questions. You must learn to understand and work with emotions to truly develop the ability to ask good questions.

Why emotions are key to asking good questions and thus leadership:

1) Emotions are like smoke. The reason you look for and validate emotions is not so you can live there or focus only on them. They are like smoke in that they help you discover where the fires of threat or passion are. You can trace the smoke to its source, which leads you to your core beliefs (your most important beliefs about yourself and how you work). When you can face those then you can begin the process of building stronger relationships, teams and organizations.

2) You cannot separate emotions from values. Linked to this, you cannot separate values and choices. Any organization is held together by the values they organize around. It may be quality, cutting edge technology, it may be cheap prices or good service. Whatever values you define your organization by, if they are truly your operating values, they will be linked to experiences, passion and have direct connections to people's heart and thus their life.

3) If you haven't dealt with or don't understand your own emotions, you won't be able to deal with emotions in the questions you ask. You will focus on just the 'facts' and will not understand that facts are interpreted, in part, by each person through emotions they have (values and choices they have made). Core human emotions are what truly allow us to understand each other no matter what gender, race or culture we come from. How we show love or honor may differ, but we all know what the emotion is and desire it in some form. Trust in a relationship includes knowing and sharing our feelings. Most people have a difficult time trusting someone who shows little emotion because they seem cold and hard-hearted.

Whether we like it or not, emotions are an important part of leadership and we must learn to understand them and work with them or we will continue to struggle along like our one fingered pianist.

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Quote

"There can be no knowledge without emotion. We may be aware of a truth, yet until we have felt its force, it is not ours. To the cognition of the brain must be added the experience of the soul."
Arnold Bennett (1867-1931)

Matt Rawlins "Understanding emotions in Inquiry", The Straits Times, Singapore, 16 March 2008, Recruit section.