



Leaders who lose It: how belligerent bosses breed badly-behaved cultures...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our
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Frances felt everyone in her office was plotting against her. Conspiracies were everywhere. No one respected her. She was constantly having to hose-down bouts of bad behaviour and push her people hard for results, because she was the only accountable one.

As I started to work with her team, it became evident that although some were behaving badly, Frances seemed blind to how her own lack of emotional self-management was infecting the culture. Resistant to feedback about her impact, playing both victim and aggressor, Frances refused to reflect on how her own unregulated outbursts, over-reactions and torrid trains-of-thought kept fueling her own paranoia and turned her team more toxic.

Emotional Control – Leadership Insulator

Despite decades of leadership training, belligerent bosses like Frances who can't get a grip on their disruptive emotions, are still fairly abundant in our workplaces. They leave a trail of tension and work-trauma behind them, and rarely look back to see the damage they do – to performance, morale, relationships, staff retention or culture.

- How leaders manage their moods and how aware they are of their emotional patterns, affects the emotional climate and behaviour of their teams – and even whole organisations.
- Emotions colour the way we talk to each other and how constructive our conversations are. They affect motivation, morale, our ability to focus. They're what enable us to achieve goals, build rapport and handle relationships positively, judiciously and sensitively.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) helps leaders detect, connect with, and use feelings to handle their own, and others' emotions more effectively. It helps us cope better with frustration, control emotional outbursts and get along well with others. Its absence breeds irritation, negativity, poisonous relationships and turns teams toxic.



In practice, EI enables leaders to be more present and attentive to what's going on emotionally for them and others and consciously choose the most effective response to a situation rather than react impulsively, without thinking. For example:

- ☑ Being able to temper your temper and remain level-headed and focused instead of resorting to panic and knee-jerk reactions
- ☑ Handling difficult situations or hostile behaviour with balance rather than aggression
- ☑ Knowing how to self-calm, control stress reactions and not be overtaken by others' emotions

5 Reasons Leaders Lose It

Why is it that some leaders lose it, setting-off emotional chain-reactions that reverberate through their teams – while others remain emotionally balanced and seemingly unflappable? I can't catalogue all the emotional nuances, but here's 5 reasons I've come across ...although they all inter-mingle a good deal.

1. Leader-stress leads to dissonance

Leadership is stressful – but you already knew that. Handling heavy-duty responsibilities and constant crises full of toxic emotions on a regular basis, you can become burnt out, dispirited, scratchy, abrasive and abrupt as a result.

This is insidious because it happens so gradually and it can play havoc with our health and behaviour. Even once-resonant leaders can turn toxic and become dissonant under stress – and prolonged periods of dissonance as a leader can easily spread to infect the people you lead.

2. Blind to impacts – deaf to feedback

They're two common leadership disabilities. Leaders low in self-awareness don't see how they come across and the impacts they have. Your leadership style isn't determined by how *you* think you lead. It's determined by how you behave. *You think you're direct and assertive but maybe you come across as caustic, critical or over-demanding?*

Then there's feedback – trying to tell a leader how they come across. Some, like Frances, can be rigidly defensive in response to hard-to-hear feedback and react with denial, blame, beligerence, resentment or retaliation. Good leaders are emotionally aware of the likely impact their patterns have on others around them and work on rounding off the abrasive edges.

3. Coercive Leaders – strain of standover

Unfashionable maybe, but coercive, dictatorial models of leadership still predominate in our so-called democratic societies. Watch the behaviour of politicians and bosses who corrosively stalk our corporate corridors. The popular perception of a good leader is someone who's tough, decisive, self-focused, hard-nosed and results-driven – who puts business before benevolence and control before connectivity.

We're curiously attracted to such models of so-called 'strong' leadership that teeter on the brink of bullying and abuse of power and position. Such abrasive, arrogant or intimidating leaders seem to lack empathy, humility and sensitivity, co-erce subordinates, intimidate peers and get away rewarded. No wonder so many leaders see it as an 'undiscussable' corporate norm to aspire to.

4. The Power of Position

Starkly put, this is the "I'm the boss" syndrome. With some significant exceptions, human cultures have cultivated hierarchical, command-and-control structures that operate on power and position rather than communitarian models that value genuine consensus, consultation and joint decision-making.

Many lurk behind the rhetoric of consensus and liberal leadership but act in authoritarian, self-serving and exclusive ways that disengage staff and dampen democracy. I'm not saying leadership isn't needed – it's in our human genome. But our obsession with leadership-worship worries me and I'm happy to dispute the mental model that it needs to reside in particular people the hierarchy calls 'leaders' as opposed to being distributed throughout teams and organisations.

5. Lack of Emotional Self-Management

When you boil it down, this is probably the biggest factor behind leaders being too harsh, critical, insensitive or demanding – alienating others by not being able to control their angry outbursts, temper their tantrums, manage moodiness or cope with pressure.

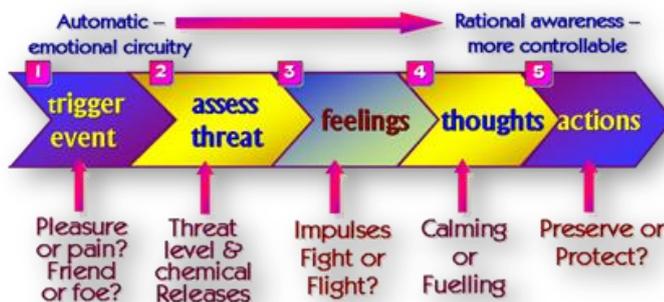
There's so many potential things to get fed-up and frustrated over at work – especially as a leader. Being able to stay level-headed and emotionally balanced past your tolerance level requires real self-control. The ability to emotionally manage yourself – as well as empathise and keep-up good connections – are powerful stabilisers and insulators when it comes to resisting the tyranny of disruptive emotions.

Emotional Meltdowns – Amygdala Attacks

Leaders who lose it, teams that are toxic and cultures that are caustic – it all tracks back to an inability to resist emotional hijacks or 'Amygdala Attacks', as I call them. In conversations and other situations where emotions run high, we're all prone to emotional meltdowns or hijacks.

Almost everyone these days has heard about the 'amygdala', and the absolutely autonomic role it plays as the brain's bodily threat alarm. One ring from it, and our whole nervous system goes into auto-pilot defensive mode – fight, flee, freeze. Under the influence of strong feelings, our amygdala powers up, we feel powerless to stop it and we act in ways we find frustrating, furious or unfathomable.

That's an 'amygdala attack'! Here's a rough flowchart of what happens:



- Attacks are triggered by external events that threaten us, or by our own wind-up thoughts that unsettle us.
- Our amygdala instantly does a threat assessment and releases a legion of chemicals (phase 2) that we experience as feelings (phase 3). Now our *fight-or-flight* response is stimulated.
- Our thoughts (phase 4) come into play

but usually, under the influence of an amygdala attack, they are heavily coloured by our feelings. They usually wind us up more and fuel our response, rather than calm. Then, we act. We attack, defend, run-away – whatever action the amygdala tells us will best preserve or protect us.

The more our amygdala has stockpiled programs featuring flare-ups, frustration, anger, anxiety or fear, the easier it can hijack our brain by flooding it with these strong and disruptive emotions where we get disabled, immobilised or overwhelmed by our feelings...

On the other hand, if the emotional patterns we have learned and stored revolve around things like empathy, patience, tolerance, restraint, self-regulation and optimism, these emotional response patterns, as Daniel Goleman points out, can "*serve rather than enslave us.*"

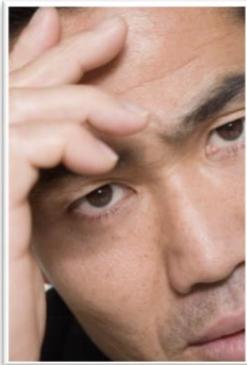
Managing Moods – Moderating Behaviour

A leader's moods set the emotional climate for workplaces. Emotional Intelligence – especially the ability to emotionally self-manage – is the key differentiator between impoverished or inspirational leadership.

Self-aware leaders know they act as *'emotional amplifiers'*. Just like organisations leave carbon footprints, leaders leave emotional footprints. For example:

- Providing positive appreciation ...or negative criticism
- Modelling positive principles ...or reinforcing negative attitudes
- Inspiring people to follow a shared vision ...or leaving them directionless
- Giving people a sense of meaning in their work ...or detracting from it
- Encouraging innovation and unleashing creativity ...or stemming it
- Being moody, withdrawn, insensitive ...or emotionally open, approachable and connective

When leaders use emotions positively, they resonate with people, inspiring better performance, good moods and good work. When leaders manage moods and behaviours well – they're buoyant, positive, supportive or connective – other people feel understood, cared for and validated. It brings out the best in people and encourages them to put in extra effort. It can help them regain energy and focus, take a new direction, get themselves out of the doldrums, make work more meaningful and create positive emotional work climates.



The reverse is too often true too. When managers dwell in negative emotions, they infect others with their off-colour moods. They create *dissonance* and dissatisfaction and they decimate group morale. Dissonant leaders spreading toxicity dot most organisation landscapes.

This dynamic hinges on how emotionally intelligent leaders are. Dissonant leadership is when leaders are 'out of sync' with the moods, emotions and feelings of the people around them. Dissonant leadership is discordant.

Over time it creates toxic climates. Lacking in empathy, dissonant leaders are often unwittingly or uncaringly off-key. They act in ways that set off negative emotional chain-reactions in others of excessive anger, fear, high anxiety or sullen silence. Negative moods like chronic crankiness, apathy or anxiety disrupt workflow, distracting people's emotional attention from focus on the task-at-hand and diminishing performance.

If a leader's mood can sway the feelings of others and have such a big impact on workplace performance and productivity, then a major piece of personal mastery work for leaders is emotional leadership both in terms of:

- Managing their own moods and emotions – remaining positive, balanced and supportive
- Maintaining good feelings in those being lead and creating a positive emotional climate

Mood management *doesn't* mean NOT having moods. We all experience bad moods and general 'moodiness' from time-to-time. And after all, who wants to avoid being in a good mood! But getting our moods under control (well most of the time anyway) means getting off the emotional roller-coaster (and if you're a leader it also means not forcing people to take a ride on yours).

Being more mindful of our emotional patterns and the impact they have on others, and getting our feelings under control, is an antidote that helps us to manage disruptive emotions, combat stress, resist trauma, avoid emotional excess, and insulate ourselves from the harmful effects of toxic behaviours.

In our long-running *Leading with Emotional Intelligence* program we look at leadership through the lens of **7 crucial EI Leader Practices** which include helping leaders raise their level of emotional self-awareness and hone their mood management through 12 Emotional Self-Management strategies

See our on-line **Course Calendar** at www.thechangeforum.com for dates our public clinics are coming up in your area. And if you've a group of 10 or more, we're happy to come to you. Use our on-line **Enquiry** form or call **Bill Cropper** direct to discuss arrangements for an in-house clinic at a venue of your choice.

More on *Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence* on-line at www.thechangeforum.com

- See our free **FactFiles**, **Articles** and **CC E-News** e-zine back-issues for thoughts and tips on emotional intelligence, conversations, leadership, culture and change
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- Review our on-line **Course Calendar** for up-coming scheduled events in your area
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Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence can be delivered **in-house** as a useful adjunct to your leadership learning or coaching culture strategy. Segments of the clinic can also be delivered individually through **personalised coaching sessions**. Want to find out "what all this coaching stuff is about"? Download a copy of our **Coaching Prospectus**. It gives you some simple, straightforward answers to help you make up your mind whether our coaching approach might suit you.

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