

## Emotions: Leadership's Secret Weapon

*"Leadership isn't something you do writing memos; you've got to appeal to people's emotions. They've got to buy in with their hearts and bellies, not just their minds."* ~ Lou Gerstner, IBM's former CEO

**E**motions are critical to business success because they drive behaviors. Companies that achieve an emotional buy-in from consumers and employees will have a competitive advantage in a world of increasing commoditization.

Business has a long tradition of ignoring emotions in favor of rationality. Feelings are disregarded as messy, dangerous, inferior and even irrelevant to day-to-day operations. In marketing and in managing, the emphasis has been on appealing to the rationality of people.

But a growing body of scientific evidence reveals that subconscious feelings drive decisions, up to 95% of which are made through the brain's emotion centers and only then filtered into its cognitive parts. Psychologists, neuroscientists and behavioral economists now agree that leaders who fail to understand how emotions drive actions will ultimately fail.

Emotionally astute leaders leverage feelings to gain employee commitment, engagement and performance, according to Dan Hill, CEO of Sensory Logic and author of *Emotionomics: Leveraging Emotions for Business Success* (Kogan Page, 2008). Similarly, experts featured in a Time magazine cover story (January 17, 2005) confirmed the link between satisfaction and productivity, citing a 10 percent improvement in job performance among fulfilled employees.

A company's emotional climate may account for up to 30 percent of job performance, according to case studies that Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee reviewed for their book, *Primal Leadership* (2002). CEOs, they note, are responsible for creating more than 50 percent of this climate.

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## 3 Keys to Leadership Success

Numerous studies indicate that sustainable business success depends on three key leadership areas:

1. **The greater good.** Leaders must influence others to join a cause greater than making a profit or creating good products or services. They give employees reasons to believe in the company and its leadership ideals. They establish themselves as credible, trustworthy and unselfish—role models who are looking out for the group and individual performers. They ask others to join “us,” without sacrificing their “me.”
2. **Clear vision.** Continual change may be traumatic for employees, so leaders must paint a convincing picture of the future that motivates and prepares people for what’s coming.
3. **Cohesive culture.** Employees expect their leaders to read a situation in emotional terms and proactively foster a climate of participation and collaboration. Leaders also devote time and energy to grooming talent, as well as recognizing and rewarding good work.

Each of these leadership roles requires emotional awareness and, most importantly, the ability to express appropriate feelings effectively. Having clear ideals and beliefs serves no good if leaders cannot connect on an emotional level with those they lead.

In turn, leaders must learn how to express their own emotions. Years of education and training, with an emphasis on cognitive skills, may mean they’re far from adroit at managing their own feelings.

Because most emotions are perceived nonverbally, there may be a disconnect between what leaders say and what they actually communicate. Emotional astuteness requires an awareness of what one feels, verbalizes and conveys through nonverbal communication. Conversely, leaders must learn to read others’ emotions—individually and in groups—to ask the right questions and build trust.

### The Greater Good: Character Matters

Leaders should strive to get people on board and promote enthusiasm, but many miss the mark. Workplace statistics show that only 25 percent of employees are truly engaged.

Senior management’s goal is to develop an atmosphere of trust and generosity of spirit. When leaders give workers something they can believe in—a cause greater than the common good—they engage both hearts and minds.



From a psychological standpoint, most of us seek meaning in our lives, and many of us find it through our work. Leaders can facilitate this by communicating their own beliefs, passions and ideals.

### The Leadership Trust Gap

Two barriers create a trust gap between leaders and their staffs:

1. The financial chasm that results from large pay disparities
2. A disconnect between verbal and nonverbal communication

While there is an inherent desire to identify and bond with one’s leader, people instinctively defend their own interests and exercise caution before committing their careers and livelihoods to anyone.

No one wants to commit to the wrong cause or person, which clearly highlights the importance of leaders’ honesty and authenticity.

### Pay Disparities

Pay disparities can throw a massive wrench into the trust equation.

In 1990, the average American worker earned \$27,000. Adjusted for inflation, this figure remains constant two decades later. But CEO compensation in the United States has increased 100 to 400 percent, and surveys show that 90 percent of institutional investors believe most executives are overpaid.

It doesn’t take a degree in psychology to predict that envy leads to divisiveness. Such pay disparities between top leaders and their employees undermine workers’ security and sense of well-being.

To make matters worse, the constant threat of downsizing and outsourcing magnify people’s fears.

This explains why employees struggle to see their leaders as invested in a shared outcome. But leaders who recognize trust-gap factors can prepare to deal with these issues by establishing an emotionally solvent, personal connection with their people.

Flailing leaders may need to engage executive coaches to help them work on their “emotional intelligence.” Employees are laboring in a harsh economy, so leaders need to learn and practice empathy, honesty and authenticity.

## Nonverbal Communications

The second obstacle to overcome is the disconnect between what a leader says and actually feels. As a leader, you will experience a “say/feel” gap when your messages are incongruent with your physical expressions. In truth, facial expressions convey your feelings much more accurately than any words you say.

Research about messages estimates that 55 percent of meaning is derived from body language, 38 percent from vocal intonation and only 7 percent from the actual words.

We discern emotional content from others’ facial expressions, with seven universal emotions found across all cultures. In research done by Paul Eckmann in 2003, there are seven basic facial expressions of emotions:

1. **Positive:** happiness
2. **Neutral:** surprise
3. **Negative:** anger, fear, sadness, disgust and contempt

Studies of CEOs’ facial expressions reveal that honest and robust social smiles trump all others when one wants employees to feel hopeful and buy into goals. The worst possible expressions are dislike, especially when combined with anxiety (fear). Condescending, scared leaders will invariably cut themselves off from others.

The key here is for leaders to acquire knowledge of how congruent their nonverbal facial expressions are with their intended message. Again, working with an executive coach can help.

## Clear Vision

Employees require reassurance that they will be protected by astute, decisive leaders who know how to steer the company through tumultuous times. Leaders’ strategic instincts—and how they are communicated to followers—will determine the overall level of confidence and support. This requires accurate self-awareness.

The immediate impact of change is often quite negative, so emotional concerns must be alleviated. Emotionally astute leaders recognize there is always resistance,

especially at the beginning of change initiatives. While emotional dynamics should be factored into change-management planning, they rarely are.

It’s your job to provide hope while alleviating fear—not by denying it, but by predicting it, being honest about it and normalizing it. Successful leaders translate vision into action by explaining why a company is taking a new direction, as well as the consequences for failing to act.

Be honest when addressing why your company can no longer cling to the status quo. Workers’ emotional desire for security will motivate them to accept changes that initially cause them to recoil.

To make a clear case, focus on emotional benefits. You can subsequently invoke a sense of victory, ensure greater job security and get your troops excited about a fresh new direction. They will then be more receptive to rational analysis of facts and data.

Make sure your message is clear, simple, heartfelt and aligned with your company’s current emotional climate. Incorporate body language and facial expressions that strengthen the impact of your words.

## Cohesive Culture

The mark of great CEOs or senior leaders is their ability to build companies where employees feel welcome to participate, collaborate and receive recognition.

Building a corporate culture that inspires employees to give their best requires three qualities, according to authors Kouzes’ and Posner’s worldwide survey on effective leadership (*The Leadership Challenge*):

1. Honesty
2. Forward-looking
3. Inspirational

These three qualities determine the effectiveness of a good leader. Honesty always comes first, as employees need to know whether they trust their leaders enough to follow them.

The ability to look forward helps people feel more secure about the direction in which they’ll be heading (provided they believe in a positive outcome).

Inspiration is not a form of vague charisma. Leaders must have the ability to inspire goodwill and hope. Foster positive feelings in those you lead—sooner, rather than later.

## Emotions Matter: An Action Plan

Evolution gave us feeling before thinking. Leaders must therefore quell fears before expecting employees to embrace the cold, hard facts. As Dan Hill writes in *Emotionomics*:

*“Changing people’s beliefs is hard work: Selling them on what they already believe and feel is far easier.”*

Facts are malleable, but our gut instincts are unyielding. Every leader must understand that:

- The human side of business consumes most of a company’s operating costs. Failure to be emotionally adept is counterproductive—perhaps even suicidal.
- Employees are the players who turn their CEO’s dreams of progress from a nuts-and-bolts strategic plan into reality—an outcome that requires emotional commitment.

The following action steps can help you achieve your desired results:

1. Create faith in a “greater we” by establishing yourself as a leader who’s a real person—not the heir apparent to a big title, office and salary.
2. Be more personable in your communications. Only then can you generate the emotional momentum necessary to push through change.
3. Communicate a vision that inspires pride. Negative feelings can undo a company during a period of change, and they’re highly contagious. Become a student of nonverbal expressions and body language.
4. Meet with employees in person, and use face time to connect with them and solicit or accept advice. Greater familiarity leads to sound relationships..



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