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Stalking the Elusive Leader: The Role of Emotions in Recruiting

Some say there's no place for emotions in the workplace. On the contrary: you need to understand emotions if you want to hire the best leaders.

By **Stephen Balzac**

We like to think of ourselves as highly rational beings, but the fact is we're just not that good at being rational. The recent *Star Trek* movie demonstrated the normally imperturbable Mr. Spock making foolish decisions based on emotional reactions. Later in the movie, Spock's reasoned, logical approach is less than sufficient to rally the crew. Certainly they follow him, because he is the legitimate commander at that moment—but they are not excited. When Kirk takes command, however, it is another story. Kirk engages them on an emotional level, a level deeper and considerably more powerful than logic.

I hear all the time about how there is no room for emotions in the workplace. Yet, the companies where I've seen this implemented are about as unemotional as Mr. Spock: in other words, they put on a good front. Under pressure, though, they are as emotional as anyone else. I still remember, from early in my consulting career, the manager of a team screaming at me that he did not allow emotions to influence his behavior. For some odd reason, the irony of the moment was lost on him.

The simple reality is that emotions are very much a part of our lives. As a competitive fencer in college and on the national circuit afterward, I learned early on that an athlete ignores their emotions at their own peril. As a team member in sports or as a team member and manager in business, I learned again the value, and risk, of emotions. All emotions are not created equal: some will lead your team to victory, while others will guarantee defeat.

Leaders get a tremendous amount of deference and respect. We talk about leaders as though they single-handedly accomplished their great feats. We talk about men like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates as if they, personally, were responsible for the products that made their companies success-

ful. Ultimately, a leader is only as good as the team he or she leads. Without a team, a leader is just some guy taking a walk. Leadership is the ability to get your team to follow you because of their own free will, not because of threats or offers of money: mercenaries leave when the going gets too tough. For a company looking to hire a senior executive, or even an individual contributor, this means three things:

- Knowing which emotions matter.
- Being able to recognize the person who can stimulate the appropriate emotional reactions in people. Once you know what you're looking for, this step is actually pretty easy.
- Being able to convince that person to take the job.

Let's look now at which emotions matter, and in particular which ones we want to develop. I will start, however, by highlighting one to avoid. It's one I want to mention up front because it is, unfortunately, extremely popular.

Fans of Mel Brooks' 2,000-year-old man might recall that he described the primary means of motivation in "those days" as fear: when the lion popped up, you were motivated to run the other way. Fear is very effective at getting people to move away from something. Scare someone enough and they'll move very rapidly away from the source of that fear, even if that means slamming full tilt into a tree. In the practice of jujitsu, using pain to create a fear of injury is often quite sufficient to convince an attacker to dive headfirst into the ground or into the nearest wall.

Although it's very popular, fear leaves something to be desired as a way of motivating employees. In one of my first jobs out of college, I got "the talk." It was my first or second day on the job at a Silicon Valley startup and the VP

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of engineering stood over me and lectured me about how high his standards were, what was expected from employees at a startup, what would happen if we didn't measure up, and so forth. At the very end, he said: "And I'm a serious hunter. I have several guns at home. What do you do for fun?"

The effects of his talk were easy to see in the behavior of the team: blaming and finger-pointing were the norm, not cooperation and problem-solving. This was less a team than a horde, bravely charging forward, in vaguely the same direction, each member quite willing to hang another out to dry. That particular company did not survive.

Ask prospective leaders if they believe that employees need to be scared in order to do their best work. The people who believe that are not at all shy about saying so. If they say "yes," thank them and move on to the next candidate. Even if they say "no," ask them what they've done to motivate people to do their best. Do they focus on the threats they used or the praise they gave? If you hear the former, watch out!

In terms of the emotions we are looking for, the first is affiliation. You might also think of it as team spirit or a sense of community. Psychologists often refer to it as "relatedness." When people come together to form a team, the first thing they do is look for common ground. How they find that common ground makes all the difference. In the absence of a leader actively building affiliation, the team will unite around anything. This might involve uniting against a member of the team who keeps a different schedule or who dresses differently; it might mean going to lunch at a particular time, and so forth. Uniting around the leader is fine to a point: the team that is held together only by a charismatic or popular manager is often unable to perform when he or she is on vacation, and is likely to leave the company if the manager leaves.

To really create affiliation, the leader needs to get to know his team members actively and encourage them to get to know one another. Take the time to find out what people like and do not like, what their hobbies are, what they do. The leader who shows appreciation for their accomplishments outside of work will motivate them to accomplish more at work. By encouraging team members to get to know and appreciate one another, the leader creates a team where the members support one another and one in which mem-

bers are not afraid to admit mistakes. If the leader can also convey a vivid image of the goals of the team and rally the team members around that image, then you have a true leader.

Always ask a prospective leader what they've done to build team spirit in previous jobs. How did they create that sense of community? Did they take the time to help employees build common ground? Or did they create unity through threats and fear? Only the former creates true team spirit and, with it, trust amongst team members.

It's possible to take affiliation too far. At one high-tech company that I worked with, I watched an interesting scenario unfold: after completing a major milestone, the engineers were high-fiving and taking some time to brag about their accomplishments. Enthusiasm and excitement were running high when a member of senior management decided to interrupt the gathering with the reminder that, "There is no 'I' in team."

This utterance had an effect not dissimilar to that of a skunk wandering into a fancy dinner party. On the scale of wet blankets, this was one that had been left out in the rain for a week. Within a few seconds, all that enthusiasm was gone, vanished into the ether.

Properly harnessed, that enthusiasm could have catapulted the team into its next milestone. Instead, the team approached its next milestone with a shocking lack of energy, especially given the successes they'd had to that point.

The problem is that while there may not be an "I" in team, a team is made up of individuals. There are three "I"s in individual. What does a team do? Well, in most situations we hope the team will win. There's an "I" right there in the middle of win. Oddly enough, you can't win if you take out the "I," which brings me to my next point.

Autonomy, or the lack thereof, is one of the biggest problems in teams. Nobody likes to have their autonomy threatened. If I can do the work by myself, I'm preserving my autonomy, but at the cost of depriving the rest of the group. Conversely, the employee who refuses to do anything is also protecting his autonomy by demonstrating that no one can tell him what to do. Both of these solutions preserve autonomy by sacrificing affiliation with the group.

Here's an example of the impact of autonomy. At one company I worked with, the new CEO's vision involved very substantial changes to the way training was conducted. Ex-

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isting trainers went ballistic. They saw the new policy as undermining their authority, compromising the mission of the company, and reducing the quality of their classes. In short, they saw their autonomy as being under attack. The board was having doubts that they had hired the right person. It wasn't long before all parties were so busy screaming at each other that none could hear what the others were saying, putting the entire company at risk. It was at about this point that the chairman of the board called me. My solution was to help both parties develop stronger affiliation. Once the employees got to know the CEO better, they began to trust that she wasn't trying to tell them how to do their jobs; as she got to know them as individuals, she realized why her initial actions, well-meaning though they were, had provoked such a strong reaction.

They are now doing quite well.

Always ask prospective managers how structured a work environment they expect. In their previous jobs, did they encourage people to develop creative approaches to accomplishing goals? Did they allow employees to work from home when that was feasible? If not, find out why not. I've found that the people who say, "The timing never worked out," or "It was too hard to track progress," are the ones who are least able to allow employees latitude in getting the job done. Permitting autonomy does involve more up-front work setting up clearly defined goals and schedules. Find out if your prospective manager has ever done that before. If they tell you there's no need, they'll just keep an eye on things, or if they tell you that you just can't trust people to work if they're not being watched, run the other way.

Finally, the last critical piece is competence. I'm not talking about hiring competent people, but about hiring people who can create an atmosphere of competence. Nothing succeeds like the expectation of success. Fundamentally, managers can motivate employees in one of two ways: they can focus on failures, and make dire predictions about what will happen if you screw up; or they can focus on successes, and remind the employee of the things they did well. I learned in Jujitsu as a student, and later as an instructor, that the second works better. As a director at a Silicon Valley startup, I found that it worked there, too. The best way to encourage someone to work harder, to tackle more dif-

icult challenges, to put in that extra effort for the company is to build them up, not tear them down. People are energized by memories of success.

Ask candidates what they did when an employee made a mistake or expressed doubt about her ability to handle a task. Did the manager resort to threats or to encouragement? Was the encouragement specific, along the lines of, "Remember when we had to deal with the Jones account? You didn't think you could manage it, but you knocked it out of the park!" Or was it vague, along the lines of, "Hey, you're smart, you'll do it." The former shows a leader who has taken the time to really pay attention to the person as an individual, knows who they are, and can remind them of their previous success. The latter demonstrates a manager who regards encouragement as a pro forma activity. Remember affiliation? If a leader wants to be believed when he tries to build someone's sense of competence, he needs to have done his homework and built affiliation. The person to hire is the one who can manage the process of how the group works, not just the work itself.

So let's suppose you've found that person. How do you get them to accept an offer from your company? Clearly, this is the easy part. After all, how could they possibly even consider wanting to work for anyone else? You're the only job in town, right?

Well, maybe not. First of all, the best people generally have options. Second, the interview is a two-way street. You're checking them out, but they are also checking you out. But what about the salary, the stock options, and the benefits? While those shouldn't be discounted, the fact is your competitors are offering pretty much the same things. Besides, how many times have you had the perfect candidate turn down that fantastic pay package to go to some company that, on the surface at least, doesn't seem to offer anything competitive? In the end, what makes the difference is, once again, emotion. Logic is fine, but emotion makes people act.

What have you been doing to build affiliation with the candidate throughout the interviewing process? Have you made them feel appreciated for who they are, not just for the skills they bring or for the benefits the company is hoping to gain by hiring them? If you make the interaction *quid pro quo*, in other words, you provide salary and benefits in return for services to be performed, then you'll lose the can-

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didate to the company that makes it all about them. A quid pro quo relationship lacks emotional connection: it's impersonal, and hence missing the critical component of affiliation. Certainly such a component can support affiliation, but it cannot serve as affiliation. There are several ways to build that sense of affiliation during the interviewing process.

Begin by recognizing the roles played by safety and risk. No matter who you are, no matter how important the job, everyone feels a certain amount of nervousness when contemplating a new job. Unquantified risk tends to turn people off. Be open about the risks, quantify them, and demonstrate both how the company can help the candidate manage the risks and also what the potential rewards are. Never try to pretend that there are no risks. First, that's not true. Second, a total lack of risk is boring. It's hard to feel a sense of competence or autonomy when there's no challenge.

Next, demonstrate during the interviewing process how the company can help them meet their personal as well as their career goals. Ask about their dreams. If someone says they've always wanted to get their doctorate, talk about the tuition-reimbursement program. If someone is a serious amateur athlete, let them talk to employees who successfully manage their sports life and their jobs. Don't tell the candidate about the wonderful community awaiting them. Show them. Let them experience a taste of it.

Finally, don't try to talk someone into taking the job. The odd thing about trying to talk someone into something is that the more we try to convince, the more they argue. Anyone with children, especially teens, has no doubt experienced this phenomenon. The feeling that someone is trying to convince us of something infringes on our autonomy. Instead, let them convince themselves. I frequently tell clients to ask, "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is absolutely perfect, how well do think this position matches what you are looking for?"

Let's suppose they answer, "About a seven." Ask them, "Why not a five?"

No, that's not an error. If you ask them to tell you why you're not a nine, they'll tell you all the things wrong with the position. If you ask them why not a five, they'll tell you what's right about it. It's what they say that will convince them, not what you say. If you want affiliation, allow them their autonomy.

Create a sense of affiliation, foster autonomy, and build an environment of competence. The best leaders are the people who can do all of those things, and doing those things is the best way to get those leaders to come work at your company.

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Stephen Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker, and, in the words of Indiana Jones, a part-time professor of psychology and management. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com, (1) 978-298-5189), an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses to increase revenue and build their client base. steve@7stepsahead.com