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Leadership & Managing People

The Best Managers Balance Analytical and Emotional Intelligence

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A photograph of a bouquet of flowers, including pink, orange, and purple blooms, wrapped in crumpled newspaper. The bouquet is set against a light blue and white background.

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Have you ever responded to a colleague or direct report in a way that left them feeling unheard or unappreciated, even though that was not your intention? Perhaps you gave them a prescriptive solution when what they needed was an empathetic ear. Or maybe you emphasized deadlines, task-related commitments, and accountability at a time when what they needed from you was compassion and understanding. As a manager, it is likely that you have experienced this at some point. These types of experiences are even more likely to occur during periods of crisis like the one in which we currently find ourselves.

These are extremely challenging times. We are in the midst of a global pandemic with the numbers infected by the coronavirus in the millions and deaths in the hundreds of thousands. Because of the corresponding economic shutdown, many businesses are closing their doors permanently. In the U.S., we are experiencing unemployment levels not seen since the Great Depression. On top of all of this, streets are filled with protesters crying out for justice after yet another unarmed black man, George Floyd, was killed at the hands of the police, seen in its entirety in a shocking nine minute video viewed all over the world.

In times like these our employees are struggling. They are stressed. They are afraid. They are worried about their health. They are worried about their ability to provide for themselves and their families. And, on a broader level, they are concerned about the current and future health of the United States and the rest of the world. Truth be told, you are likely feeling some of the same things. Yet, as a manager, you are required to soldier on. Budgets have to be managed, sales targets have to be met, and difficult decisions have to be made to ensure the ongoing viability of your

organization.

It is of paramount importance to attend to the needs, fears, and concerns of your employees. It is also vital that you solve pressing problems and make critical decisions necessary to sustain the business. The problem is that these two things require us to activate different parts of our brain. And, we can sometimes get stuck in either the network in our brain that enables that task-focused attention needed to solve problems, or in the other network that facilitates reflection, compassion, and social connection.

To be most effective in leading and truly helping our employees, however, we need *both* networks. We need to understand them and their specific challenges *and* we need to relate to their feelings and emotional state. We need to form and confirm our thoughts about their perspective *and* we need to be open to hearing and seeing what they hear, see, and feel.

Thankfully, we can turn to recent research for insight into how these two networks work in our brains — and how to become more adept at balancing both.

Insight from Recent Neuroimaging Studies

Research by our colleague, professor Anthony Jack at Case Western Reserve University, describes two of the major neural networks functioning in our brains as the analytic network (AN), or technically the task-positive network; and the empathic network (EN), also known as the default-mode network.

The AN helps us make sense of things and events. We use it when we are solving problems and making decisions. It helps us engage in abstract or analytic thinking, like financial analysis and data analytics. The EN enables us to scan the environment and be open to new ideas and other people. What's really interesting is that these two networks oppose each

other. More specifically, they actually suppress each other. When one is activated, the other is deactivated.

Professor Jack calls these two networks *opposing poles of reason*. Both involve cognitive activity, both involve fast and slow thinking, both involve reason. However, the AN reasoning is more about information and analysis and the EN reasoning is more about people or qualitative observations.

As we also discuss in our book, *Helping People Change*, we need both networks. We further contend that the most effective leaders do indeed use both and they are able to toggle back and forth between them in a fraction of a second. We also believe that the ease with which a person can toggle or cycle back and forth between these networks depends in part on their self-awareness, deliberate practice, and conscious intent.

How to Achieve the Right Balance

1. Be aware of your own predilection. What is your “go-to” neural network?

Being aware of your dominant neural network, or the one that is most likely to get activated for you across a variety of situations, requires the practice of mindfulness. You need to be fully and consciously aware of momentary experience. Questions you might ask yourself include:

- How am I processing things at this moment? Am I thinking about concrete facts, details, or solutions? Or, am I reflecting more openly and creatively about possibilities? Am I thinking about what is objectively right or wrong? Or, am I weighing the relative merits of what seems fair or morally just?
- What types of situations or activities tend to pull me into the analytic network? When am I most likely to be pulled into the empathic network?
- On the whole, do I spend more time in the analytic network or the

empathic network?

2. Exercise the neural network that isn't your go-to. There are a variety of ways to exercise your empathic and analytic neural network "muscles." A useful approach is to spend more time exercising the network that you are less likely to use. It is similar to the benefit of a right-handed basketball player working on dribbling and shooting with their left hand to improve their overall game.

To exercise your empathic network:

- Complete at least one 15-minute conversation each day in which your sole purpose is to understand the other person, not to solve their problem or give advice.
- When you are listening to someone, stop whatever else you are doing or thinking about and try to give that person your full attention. Attempt to listen beyond what you hear, tuning into the whole picture of what you hear and see, (i.e. body language, tone of voice, emotional cues, etc.).
- If you think there is something you know with relative certainty, push yourself to challenge that assumption and consider other possibilities.

To exercise your analytic network:

- Schedule specific windows of time within which to complete certain tasks. Hold yourself to those committed windows, even if they are not actually firm deadlines.
- Identify a situation at work that requires a new approach to reach a successful outcome. Maybe it's a change to an existing vendor contract. Before you seek the perspective of others, do some research. Come up with questions that you need to get addressed. List two to three new resources that you normally wouldn't think of,

including people. Write down the pros and cons of each resource, considering the cost of each and their potential contributions. Connect your notes together into a framework to help you move ahead.

- Compile a list of household expenses incurred each month such as utilities. Record your actual expenses paid over the last 12 months. What are the trends you see in the numbers? What was the highest or lowest amount paid and in which month? How do the expenses compare to what you anticipated?

3. Practice balancing both. Once you have mastered the ability to be more aware of when you are either operating in the analytic or empathic network at any given time, and you have developed the capacity to activate either network upon demand, you are then ready to practice effectively balancing the two networks. Again, both networks are important. Your objective here is to develop an ability to seamlessly toggle back and forth between the two networks as necessary.

Specific things you can do to work on your ability to toggle between the two networks include:

- Be clear on your intention. We may sometimes be aware of a need to toggle from one network to the other, but consciously choose not to do so. In other words, sometimes it is not an *ability* issue, but instead a *motivation* issue.
- When making (or communicating) a decision that impacts others, think about potential personal implications of the decision. Spend time attending to these relational aspects in addition to the technical ones.

The analytic and empathic networks are waging a constant battle in your brain. When one is activated, the other is suppressed. You don't have to choose sides, however. It is not that one is good and the other is bad. You

actually need them both. The key to maximizing your effectiveness as a leader and having more productive relationships is learning to be more aware of which network is activated at any given time and being able to seamlessly toggle back and forth between the two as necessary.

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