

## Emotions are fantastic teachers —if listened to properly

Wednesday, August 19, 2009, Cristina Muntean

As uncertainty, confusion, frustration and anger are mounting within Czech companies, driven by cost cuts, restructuring and layoffs caused by the economic downturn, more and more decision-makers get confronted with the necessity to deal with such emotions.

Human resource (HR) experts say that limiting the damage done by fear and anger and learning how to channel such emotions into positive energies has become vital for companies' sustainability and long-term development.

HR experts agree that, so far, the emphasis has fallen on decision makers who were able to pragmatically fix problems rather than create new business prospects. Yet, a new trend has been gaining importance for the last decade. Karin Genton-L'Epée, managing owner at L'Epée Coaching & Consulting and a Prague-based business coach, said that the new focus falls on



Karin Genton-L'Epée, Photo: Jakub Hněvkovský

emotions and on the right brain, the driver of the left part of the body that contains the heart. This theory was articulated by authors such as Daniel Pink in his book "A Whole New Brain." Moreover, a book published in 1995 by Daniel Goleman, "Emotional Intelligence," launched a similar perspective on what it means to be a smart manager. Even though such trends are catching on slowly in Czech society, they are here and could provide precious tools to managers who want to understand themselves and their world better, she said.

This interview is the last in a series of talks on management in times of crisis (see "[Smart leaders should use the crisis to get ready for the future](#)" and "Communication must start before a crisis hits the fan"). Besides business coaching, Genton-L'Epée is also a speaker at various seminars on personal development and leadership, and the organizer of Business Power Lunches, a series of meetings aimed at inspiring professionals to move their careers in the right direction.

**Q: What does it mean to focus more on your right brain rather than the left?**

**A:** There is definitely a shift or, at least, an acknowledgment that we do have two brains. I don't think we should emphasize one more than the other; that depends on the person and on the job. Mathematicians will definitely rely on the left brain more than on the right brain. While one might use the right brain to create new algorithms, thinking about the use of the algorithms will take place in the left brain, as most of the thinking is done there. On the other hand, creativity like arts and music involves the use of the right brain. However, tests on people who suffered injuries after accidents and had physical splits between the two brains showed that one needs the other to function. It's not that one is better—they nourish and nurture each other and it's good to acknowledge both of them.

**Q: Why is this shift happening?**

**A:** The official approach [was taken] by Daniel Goleman with his book 'Emotional Intelligence.' I believe that by connecting the words intelligence and emotional, people were more open to accept it. Now everything is connected with intelligence: cultural intelligence, physical intelligence, and so on. This happens because the world is changing. You can try to ignore your emotions; however, at some point they will remind you of their existence and come back at you. In any kind of field, be it scientific or creative, emotions are a fantastic way to understand who you are and what you want to do. Ignoring them can be pretty damaging.

**Q: What would be the result of such unawareness?**

**A:** Emotions that aren't acknowledged and taken care of can create a lot of diseases. Many scientific studies support this argument. Some people still don't want to acknowledge their emotions because they don't understand them. Moreover, people are even afraid of their own emotions because they haven't been given space to express them. Some people like [painter Pablo] Picasso had a fantastic opportunity to express them through art. Others utilized more damaging outlets of expression, like [20th century dictators] Hitler and Stalin, as psychologist Alice Miller clearly explains in her various books.

**Q: What should managers know about emotions?**

**A:** Managers need to get in touch with their emotions and realize that ignoring them won't help them succeed. That's the first step. It isn't about having or not having [emotions], it's about to what degree our emotions are affecting us and how we express them. Working in a lab for example might not be as emotionally challenging as working in a newsroom; interacting with petri dishes is more rational than with dealing with breaking news. But in general, emotions become an issue when they are ignored or misunderstood. Ideally we need to learn to balance reason and emotions. The more one interacts with people, the more they have to deal with emotions because relationships are mainly about emotions. To put it simply, ignoring emotions doesn't work.

**Q: Why didn't managers acknowledge emotions so far, if they are so important?**

**A:** Managers, like many of us, don't want to acknowledge emotions because we associate them with weakness. But emotions are a fantastic tool, they are the signal that something is

going on and that it is time for introspection. Emotions will tell us about what we like and don't like. The four major emotions people experience on a regular basis are happiness, fear, anger and sadness. Each of them reveals what is important for us.

The emotions that usually affect us the most and the ones we would love to have full control over are fear and anger. We all love happy people and most of us communicate happiness easily; sadness is about giving us a chance to grieve and mourn. But those two, even though they exist at work, aren't as challenging as fear and anger.

**Q: How should fear and anger be dealt with in the working environment?**

**A:** Fear is usually about having an expectation and not being sure about our ability to meet that expectation. Most of the time, the best way to deal with fear is to prepare ourselves by doing legwork. Every time you realize that you're afraid of fulfilling a task, it is time to stop, think and identify all the steps to do and do your homework. When we take the time to prepare ourselves, half of the fear is taken away.

People say that the most significant fear after death is public speaking. I've learned that public speaking is indeed intimidating, but if you practice and prepare yourself, it becomes less scary. Anger is the other meaningful emotion because it tells you what's important for you. And if you acknowledge and understand it, then you can tell people: by the way, when you do this, there is a risk for me to be angry. So, then, people have a choice either to make you angry by continuing doing what annoys you or avoiding making you angry by not doing it.

**Q: How can you communicate things that make you angry to your environment?**

**A:** I always use the example of being late. Some people are chronically late, the same way as some people are always on time. There are also cultural differences: Often, Latin people have difficulties being on time, they show up when they can, while Anglo-Saxons and Germanic are more prompt to respect specific time tables. No one is right or wrong; the question is how you will communicate that information so there are no bad feelings.

Most people don't mean to offend you; they just don't know what works for you. First, you must know what works for you and then you can tell people: by the way, when you do this, it works, and when you do that, it doesn't. That's how people become responsible for each other. I do believe that emotions are fantastic teachers provided we listen to what they 'tell' us.

**Q: What is the best approach to put emotions into your own service?**

**A:** The best approach is to accept our emotions by being aware of them, and then to identify them. Then, we need to identify what triggers them—what created those emotions. After that, it's like anything else: it takes practice. One reason people do sports besides trying to be healthy and fit is that it's a fantastic way to channel emotions. Sports are a great way to relax when dealing with people. Successful people balance their four energy levels: the physical level with the emotional, mental and spiritual level. When you read about the life of successful people, usually in America, they all do sports. Part of it is a trend but it keeps them healthy. People think and feel better when they exercise.

**Q: How do you deal with your own emotions as a manager when you're exposed to high levels of emotions such as fear and insecurity from your team and employees?**

**A:** One of the best ways to deal with emotions is to breathe. This is one reason I believe yoga is becoming so popular; a regular yoga practice teaches how to breathe and handle emotions physically and emotionally. So, you can learn to deal with emotions at the physical level by just breathing and being aware of how it affects your body.

One of the immediate benefits of breathing is that it helps you relax, and being relaxed helps with feeling self-confident. And a self-confident manager will have an easier time to deal with his/her team members' high levels of emotions.

**Q: What kind of path will emotional management take in the future?**

**A:** I think that in the future and actually even today, many companies understand that results and success are strongly linked with how one deals and handles his/her emotions. While some managers might not like it, they at least accept it. This is either because it works for them—they realize that when they acknowledge their emotions they are happier and more comfortable—or because it makes them more successful. It is even more important when we emphasize the need for creativity and innovation as it's hard to be creative without emotions.

**Q: Will emotional management become a more essential part of people's education?**

**A:** I think incorporating emotional management in people's education is going to increase, although we are resistant to changes. But we're making progress. Give us another 20 years and we have a chance. People are wary when it comes to emotions; it's a sensitive topic because it resonates deeply inside us. One of the ways to incorporate emotional management into the educational system is to acknowledge and incorporate it into company cultures. But I am confident that it will soon become a reality because it's too painful and costly to ignore it.

I strongly believe that acknowledging emotions in business life is going to be part of our management philosophy, as it is the most efficient way to improve our communication and overall success.