

6

The Second Practice – Harness Emotions

EMOTIONS AFFECT WHAT WE PAY ATTENTION TO, HOW WE make sense of cues and how we act. They affect our decision-making processes, our judgement and our propensity to take risks.¹ Damasio, one of the world's leading experts on the neurophysiology of emotions, claims:

'emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making, for worse and for better . . . selective reduction of emotion is at least as prejudicial for rationality as excessive emotion. It certainly does not seem true that reason stands to gain from operating without the leverage of emotion. On the contrary, emotion probably assists reasoning, especially when it comes to personal and social matters involving risk and conflict'.²

Research has shown that patients who have experienced damage to parts of the brain associated with emotions find it difficult to make decisions.³ We know that when we process cues and store them in long-term memory, we access both the emotional and logical parts of our brains. As a result, many of our belief structures are charged with emotion, and this emotion is activated whenever our beliefs

¹ Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.

² Damasio, A. (1999) *The Feeling of What Happens – Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. London: Heinemann.

³ LeDoux, J. (1998) *The Emotional Brain*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

are recalled from memory.⁴ However cold, logical and objective a decision you appear to make, emotion has had a hand in it somewhere.

The role that emotions play in our sensemaking and our decision making is particularly relevant when it comes to blind spots. We have already seen that blind spots often arise from our desire to avoid the difficult and painful emotions experienced whilst thinking and learning. However, we do this at our cost: emotions convey complex meanings. If learning is going to take place, it is important to surface the emotions and interpret the meanings effectively.

The challenge here is that the heightened emotional intensity experienced whilst learning (for example, fear and anger) can confuse and misguide us. Blind spots often result from a mishandling of our emotions. Sometimes we let our emotions rule our thinking – we believe what we feel. When we feel despair, we believe there is no hope; when we feel angry, we believe others wish us harm. Allowing emotions to infuse our thinking like this causes us to make poor decisions. On other occasions we suppress our emotions and refuse to make sense of them. When we do this, our emotions make their impact at a subconscious level and we make decisions influenced by emotions we are not aware of. Managing our emotions during learning is a complex skill; we need to be able to tune into sometimes difficult emotions, interpret them clearly and then manage our reaction to them.

The ability to harness your emotions and learn from them is particularly relevant to leadership. Taking leadership is an emotional business. When you take leadership you make public commitments and arouse expectations. Leaders are exposed. As well as feeling excited and hopeful, at times they feel vulnerable and lonely, frustrated and anxious. These emotions can affect their judgement. For example, feelings of insecurity may drive leaders to surround themselves with friends and ‘yes men’, sealing themselves from criticism and alterna-

⁴ Lodge, M. and Taber, C. S. (2005) ‘The Automaticity of Affect for Political Leaders, Groups and Issues: An Experimental Test of the Hot Cognition Hypothesis.’ *Political Psychology*, 26(3), 455–482. David, D. and Szentagotai, A. (2006) ‘Cognitions in cognitive-behavioural psychotherapies: toward an integrated model’. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26, 284–298.

tive views. These strategies may increase confidence and security, but do so at the cost of effective sensemaking and decision making.

The area of emotional intelligence is a huge subject and has been covered extensively in other books.⁵ In this chapter, therefore, we will focus on three areas where handling emotions is critical for effective sensemaking – *hot cognition*, *cold cognition* and *tacit emotional processing*. The following chapter will address the phenomenon of defensiveness, probably the most important source of blind spots and underperformance in organizations today.

Hot Cognition

Hot cognition is ‘thinking that is infused with strong emotion’.⁶ This strong emotion affects how we make sense and how we make decisions. This may be beneficial. A leader who is passionately committed to a strong vision may make sense of a difficult situation more optimistically, and hence persevere, where others may give up. When our thinking is infused with hope, love or empathy, it can generate powerful learning and change. However, hot cognition can lead to blind spots. This is because we may refuse to make sense of information in a way that contradicts or challenges the way we feel.

We have already seen examples of hot cognition in relation to goals, values, self esteem and psychological comfort. When we process a

⁵ For example, see Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.

⁶ Abelson first proposed the notion of *hot cognition* to describe concepts and cognition that are affect-laden (see Abelson, R. (1963) ‘Computer simulation of “hot” cognition’, in S. Tomkins and D. Messick (Eds) *Computer Simulation of Personality*. New York: Wiley). Since then it has been tested and refined by psychologists in cognitive, social and political psychology. See, for example, Lodge, M. and Taber, C. S. (2005) ‘The Automaticity of Affect for Political Leaders, Groups and Issues: An Experimental Test of the Hot Cognition Hypothesis.’ *Political Psychology*, 26(3), 455–482.

cue that is relevant to any of these areas, it is more likely that we will be using hot cognition. In addition, we all have areas of sensitivity, personal *hot buttons*, that can trigger hot cognition.

When in the grip of hot cognition we can:

- believe what we feel – for example, we *feel* angry because people are challenging us, and therefore *believe* that people want to obstruct our plans. We *feel* sad at a significant setback, and therefore *believe* that we will never achieve our goals.
- refuse to listen – our minds shut down their receptive faculties. We refuse to consider any other argument – we stop learning.
- attack and judge other people and/or their positions – instead of considering what others are saying, we look for ways of attacking both them and their arguments.
- defend our positions – any thinking we do is done to support our existing arguments.
- revert to simplistic and highly emotional sensemaking – instead of considering elements of opposing arguments that may make sense, we simplify the issues, reverting to black/white thinking (if you are not with me you are against me).

We often see simplistic sensemaking in political discourse where many of the issues are highly complex but often hinge on differences in values. For example:

- If anyone attempts to *understand* the opposite point of view (e.g. the views of ‘terrorists’), they are dismissed as excusing, agreeing with and supporting that point of view. When it comes to clashes of interests and values, we see an instinctive flight to oversimplification and a rigid intolerance of complexity. There is often a genuine fear that if we *understand* the other’s point of view, we may indeed come to support it and weaken our own position.
- Ridicule of the opposition’s point of view, generating hatred and derision of the opponent (who may nevertheless expound an intelligent and convincing argument). This is seen when one side labels the other side with a concept that is

extremely emotional, ridiculous or verging on the taboo, and hence is difficult to argue with (e.g. the opposition are ‘terrorists’, ‘racists’, ‘thought police’, ‘traitors’ or, less extreme but just as dysfunctional, ‘geeks’, ‘bleeding heart Liberals’, ‘bean counters’).

Of course, these ploys are all part of the ‘game’ of debate and argument. However, people fall into the trap of *genuinely* making sense of reality in this way, and they do so when they are in the grip of strong emotions. People do genuinely feel that one side of a debate is ‘right’ and the other is ‘wrong’. This can cause us to view highly intelligent people who have a genuine living knowledge of the subject as wrong, misguided or even stupid.

In complex areas, it is rare that people are wrong. They may be wrong about ‘facts’ of course, but their point of view is rarely wrong – there will ALWAYS be an element of truth in most people’s arguments. This is because their arguments will be based upon their own living knowledge – *their* interpretation of *their* personal experience. However, it is depressingly familiar to hear each side in a conflict (and their supporters) vilify and simplify the other side’s views. As a result, people’s mental models of the complex systems they are dealing with (e.g. education, health, energy, law and order) are partial, skewed and biased. This means that the answers they generate to fix the problems simply will not work – they are not complex enough to take account of the complexity of the systems they are intended to manage.

These distortions in our thinking have long been recognized by psychologists, who call them *cognitive biases*. The following is a list of common cognitive biases:

1. *Confirmation bias* – only paying attention to and believing data that confirm what you already believe; dismissing evidence that contradicts what you already believe.
2. *Black/white thinking* – seeing the world in terms of a few extremes – if it is not black then it must be white. Refusing to take on board the complexity of a situation.
3. *Mind reading* – assuming you know the motivations, thoughts and feelings of others.

4. *Flooding* – if emotion is felt strongly enough, it must be justifiable; allowing strong emotions to ‘flood’ our reason; the belief that strong emotions are always ‘right’.
5. *Overgeneralization* – taking one event or piece of evidence and making general rules based upon it.
6. *Personalization* – believing that the motives for other people’s behaviour concern how they affect you: ‘I know he said that to hurt me’.
7. *Stereotyping* – classifying people in crude and often negative ways that deny their individuality. Blaming these groups for problems as a way of denying personal responsibility.
8. *Self-serving bias* – the tendency to take credit for events that are successful and to deny responsibility when events are less successful.
9. *Mood bias* – evaluating a situation more optimistically when one is feeling happy and less optimistically when one is feeling sad.
10. *Recency bias* – paying more attention to data that was most recently brought to your attention.

In sum, hot cognition can, if we are not careful, lead to an oversimplification in our sensemaking. Strong emotions drive us to rationalize what we feel and dismiss any ‘fact’ or opinion that may suggest our feelings are not accurate. Sometimes we have to pause before we think and examine our feelings, recognizing that making sense using ‘hot cognition’ tends to generate poor decisions in complex environments.

But, *how* do we harness these feelings and manage their effects on our sensemaking? As always, the first stage is recognizing when you are in the grips of hot cognition and acknowledging how it is affecting you. Once you recognize that you are exhibiting, say, confirmation bias, you can decide to stop it! Like all of these practices, much depends on an element of self awareness and self discipline!

It is also important to recognize that learning requires a different state of mind. When we decide to learn, we enter a different kind of mental state – a state of quietness, calm and receptivity. We will

explore this in more detail later on, but for now it is important to recognize that it is much harder to ‘learn’ when one is subject to feelings of anger, frustration or despair. In order to learn, we need to take a conscious decision to step back and reflect. Learning requires an investment of both time and energy.

Cold Cognition

Cold cognition is defined as ‘thinking that suppresses emotions, particularly those associated with compassion for and moral obligation towards others’. Compassion for and moral obligation towards others are commonly associated with empathy and guilt. The diaries show that both empathy and guilt can be profound catalysts for learning if handled correctly. Let’s start by taking an example based on one of the diarists’ experience.

Bill Harris – Guilt and Learning: A True Story

Bill was a senior manager in a logistics company that was introducing a culture change. He was responsible for driving the culture change through the company, where traditionally the values were based on nepotism, not questioning the hierarchy and divide and rule tactics. Bill, however, had strong values around teamwork, involving people in decision making, integrity, fairness and honesty and was strongly committed to the changes that involved introducing a more professional set of values.

Bill soon became absorbed in the culture change process. He was fascinated with the dynamics of change and spent a lot of time talking to the consultant that had been brought in to help. He became very close to the General Manager during the change process, as they both shared an interest in organizational change. They spent many an early evening chatting about the changes being introduced. Other people soon began talking about a senior management clique. The senior team split into two camps, with the out-group feeling excluded and marginalized.

As the changes evolved further, it became clear that the senior management team had to be reduced. Bill, knowing that this would be a painful process, nevertheless knew it was necessary for the business. He identified what the new team would look like, how this would be communicated to the rest of the team and how it would be implemented.

Feeling a little nervous about the forthcoming announcement, Bill decided to devote more time to the rest of the senior management team. As he relaxed with them over coffee, he was overwhelmed by the depth of feeling he encountered. The team expressed their anger at being excluded from the decision making, and at being relegated to an out-group, leaving Bill feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

That evening Bill reflected on his experience. The overwhelming feeling he was experiencing was that of guilt. Whilst the changes were correct, he began to realize that *how* he had gone about implementing them directly contravened his own values. He hadn't involved the people in teamwork; he hadn't consulted them; he hadn't been entirely open and honest with them. In fact, he had pretended to consult them, when in reality the decisions had been made behind closed doors between him and the GM.

Bill realized that people did not feel that they had been consulted in the changes, and that as a result they felt devalued and had lost confidence in themselves. He felt personally responsible for the difficulties they experienced. He felt concern and sympathy for the recipients of change, and this made him realize he needed to show more patience and tolerance. He concluded you cannot always consult everyone on everything. He could not truly have consulted the team about the strategic reorganization of the team itself. However, what was wrong was saying you were consulting (to yourself and others) when clearly you were not – Bill was not being honest with himself or with others. Furthermore, he could have been more sympathetic, more supportive and less impatient. This was a profound learning experience for Bill.

Bill learned a lot through this incident, but only because he was prepared to face rather painful truths about his behaviour. The depth of feeling from the others stimulated the realization that he had contravened his own values. This, in turn, prompted the guilt that caused him to reflect. And, rather than bury the guilt, he was courageous enough to face it and analyse it. From this reflection came a great deal of learning, which led to significant changes in his beliefs, emotional orientation and behaviour – changes in his living knowledge.

However, for every diarist that responded to guilt in this way, three more rationalized it away. The problem with emotions such as guilt and compassion is that they are not comfortable or convenient. Both compassion and guilt tend to get in the way of one's goals. Guilt can be horribly corrosive, leading to a drop in self esteem. However, if handled correctly, both compassion and guilt can generate profound mind shifts.

An example of the role of compassion and guilt in learning is provided by Adam Kahane, again in his book *Solving Tough Problems*.⁷ Kahane facilitated a group of leading figures from Guatemala – a country with a terrible human rights record. The group consisted of 'academics, business and non-governmental organization leaders, former guerrillas and military officers, government officials, human rights activists, journalists, national and local politicians, clergy, trade unionists and young people'.⁸ All of these people came from different sides in the conflict that had ravaged the country for many decades. At one point in the proceedings, a man named Ronalth Ochaeta, the director of the Guatemalan Archdiocesan Human Rights Office, told a story:

'Ochaeta had gone to a Mayan village to witness the exhumation of a mass grave – one of many – from a massacre. When the earth had been removed, he noticed a number of small bones. He asked the forensics team if people had their bones broken during the

⁷ Kahane, A. (2004) *Solving Tough Problems*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

⁸ Kahane, A. (2004) *Solving Tough Problems*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, p. 114.

massacre. No, the grave contained the corpses of women who had been pregnant. The small bones belonged to their fetuses.

When Ochaeta finished telling his story, the team was completely silent . . . The silence lasted a long time, perhaps five minutes. Then it ended, and we took a break.

This silence had an enormous impact on the group. In interviews years later, many members of the team referred to it.'

Kahane quotes some of the group members' recollections:

'In the end, and particularly after listening to Ochaeta's story, I understood and felt in my heart all that had happened. And there was a feeling that we must struggle to prevent this from happening again . . .'

'What happened in this country was brutal . . . But we were aware of it! . . . the workshops helped me to understand this in all its human dimension. A tremendous brutality! I was aware of it but had not experienced it. It is one thing to know about something and keep it as statistical data, and another to actually feel it . . .after understanding this, everyone was committed to preventing it from happening again.'

'His testimony was sincere, calm and serene, without a trace of hate in his voice. This gave way to the moment of silence that, I would say, lasted at least one minute. It was horrible! A very moving experience for all . . . If you ask any of us, we would say that this moment was like a large communion. No one dared break the silence.'

This is the opposite of cold cognition. It is cognition suffused by compassion; it is mature, holistic and enlightened. This type of mature, compassionate cognition moves people. And this is the problem – many people do not want to be moved; they want to continue pursuing their goals. Goals 'harden' us. One of the insights revealed by the Ochaeta story is how most cognition is cold, most of the time. Cold cognition protects us from responsibility, from guilt and from the need to take action. It is reminiscent of the philosopher Hannah Arendt's term – 'the banality of evil' – used when reporting

on the Eichmann trial to describe the events of Nazi Germany.⁹ Arendt uses the term to show how one of the greatest evils in history could be perpetrated by people just pursuing their own small goals, obeying, conforming and doing their jobs without asking too many questions regarding the outcomes of their actions or their responsibility to others. The banality of evil is made possible by means of cold cognition in its most extreme form.

In organizations, we need to challenge cold cognition and encourage more rounded, balanced and mature cognition. Balanced cognition does not mean adopting a ‘touchy-feely’ approach to management or leadership. Difficult decisions that cause hardship to others *have* to be made all the time in business, government and in the not-for-profit sectors. Balanced cognition simply means allowing yourself to feel the pain that others will feel when they experience the consequences of your difficult decisions. Balanced cognition feels the pain and attempts to ameliorate it without avoiding the tough decisions that need to be made. Quite simply, balanced cognition is not afraid to embrace the fact that we are all fully thinking, fully emotional human beings and that emotions are a legitimate and important part of organizational life. The Greeks have a word for balanced cognition: it is known as *sophrosyne*. *Sophrosyne* means reaching wisdom through a balance between reason and emotion. This is a quality that our leaders increasingly need to develop.

Tacit Emotional Processing

According to LeDoux, most of our emotional processing takes place unconsciously. We learn to love, hate, fear, like and dislike largely through our unconscious brain. If this is the case, this tacit emotional processing is not always functional, effective or conducive to healthy relationships.¹⁰

Let’s take an example from the diaries. Rob is a senior manager with Scientific Solutions. Having come out of a session looking at

⁹ Arendt, H. (1994 edition) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin Books.

¹⁰ LeDoux, J. (1998) *The Emotional Brain*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

personality types and how they influence teams, Rob is sensitized to individual differences. He writes in his diary:

'Reflected on how my behaviour towards Jack (supportive, understanding) is different to my behaviour to Tim. Both are product champions – but I'm fairly negative with Tim. Because I think him lazy?'

This simple insight has a profound effect on Rob. As he begins to reflect about Tim, probably for the first time, he begins to see that he has somehow picked up an unwarranted prejudice about him. He describes his learning in an interview:

'And that changed me completely. Strange, really strange. Because I don't know where I picked up this issue with Tim – obviously by something I picked up from other people because I don't interact with him. I was on a training course with him and . . . I quite liked Tim, and yet we came to the same business years later, and I had this bias and I couldn't tell you where I got it, I mean I obviously picked it up from other people. And things weren't going well with the interaction with Tim, and it exactly matched the bias and it just, it was just reinforced.'

By reflecting on his attitude to Tim, Rob realized that he had unconsciously picked up an unfounded prejudice, the realization of which profoundly shocked him. This insight forced him to reflect further on Tim and to evaluate how he had come to pick up this prejudice. As he reflects he begins to empathize with Tim:

'Before I had been to see him I thought he was a lousy bastard and that's why it wasn't working, and afterwards I thought about what I can learn about this, I was thinking, it must be a very lonely existence being a one person team here, because the rest of his team are spread out, and I looked at him much more sympathetically and my interaction with him then was much better, much better.'

So, whereas a year ago, Rob might have dismissed Tim as someone not worth bothering with, a year later he realizes that there is more

to this colleague than he had realized. As a result, he changes his attitude to Tim and suddenly starts to put a lot of effort into helping and supporting him:

‘I mean after that, Dave and I did a one-day workshop with him . . . to help him with business planning. If I hadn’t spotted my prejudices . . . I’d have just said sod him, I really would. So we went out of our way to set something up . . . and Tim put together a reasonable plan, had a good response from the board. Now, none of that would have happened if we hadn’t undone my prejudice.’

Rob never knew where his dislike of Tim had come from – a chance conversation, gossip, a fleeting impression? Yet this dislike was affecting all his interactions with Tim. As soon as he became aware of and challenged his own prejudice, he was able to help Tim put together a business plan which was accepted by the board.

Emotions are subtle things. Rob’s case shows how emotional orientations build up over a period of time, quite unconsciously, and affect how we make sense of things – events, other people, ourselves. In Rob’s case, he has picked up an emotional orientation and rationalized it according to his values – dismissing Tim as ‘lazy’ (something that Rob disliked intensely).

If we do not attempt to tune into our emotions, they will constantly affect our sensemaking, without our being aware of it leading to significant blind spots. Having tuned into them, we have to explore and, indeed, challenge them. We pick up emotional orientations that are unfounded and biased. We need to learn when our emotions are imparting important information and when they represent prejudices that have never been examined rationally.

One diarist describes the slow build up of emotion that affects people subconsciously over a period of time as an organization goes through change:

Karen: *So, do you sometimes take these negative events and sit down and really think about what are the implications of these, what should I do, or do you just let it rest?*

Sally: *No, I don't even know I consciously register them at the time, it's just that at some other point in the reckoning that it suddenly comes to your mind, but it's registered with you. I think as a here and now thing nothing happens, you take it on board but don't do a lot about it at the time. I think it's lots of things that slowly add up . . . everything you do affects you one way or another, you get the job right, it affects you, if your boss is shitty, it affects you, so it all affects your emotions one way or another. I can't sort of say that there's one thing or other that affects me more emotionally, because everything does positively and negatively.*

Here, Sally very graphically describes the slow build up of emotions that takes place day by day, affecting feelings, self confidence and how you interpret things around you. Every day, some little thing happens that makes you doubt yourself – nothing much to worry about, some small slight, but one that stays. And a few days later, something similar happens. Before you know it, a year down the line, Sally has lost a great deal of confidence in herself – and she can't put her finger on how precisely this has happened to her. The events that have served to undermine self esteem have not seemed particularly memorable. Many of them have been to do with new company policies and decisions. Many of them relate to how she has been treated by management and colleagues. They all accumulate to create an emotional climate that affects everyone. Other diarists, mostly in middle management positions, described similar changes in emotional orientation and self esteem that took place over the year.

It is particularly important in difficult times that we challenge these emotional orientations. You do not have to believe what you feel. Like Othello, we so often believe something is true because we feel it. In situations of change, it is common for people to feel threatened; they focus on their own survival and on their own feelings of anxiety and frustration. They no longer have the energy to think about others, so, quite inadvertently, they become less supportive and interested in their colleagues. This sends out signals that people are no longer valued. Everyone becomes inward looking and anxious; the support and help and social glue that enables work interaction to take place, breaks down. This is all picked up and made sense of unconsciously, though there is a sense that everyone is out for him or herself. This, of course, tends to drive more selfish behaviour and

the organization gets caught in a downward spiral, without even noticing it.

This all happens at a time when leadership is needed from people at all levels. But, instead of feeling confident and energized, people feel undervalued and lacking in self esteem. This is a perfectly normal response – but it is not helpful. Time out is needed to tune into the emotions, make sense of them and start to challenge them. Time out can be taken in the form of leadership retreats or change management workshops. During this time it is important to surface all these emotions, to acknowledge fears and hurts and to reconnect with one’s vision of what is both desirable and possible. It is important to remember that the future has not yet been enacted, and that, working together, with renewed energy, clarity and confidence, the future is entirely open – to be enacted in whatever way people see fit.

In all of the above examples we have seen that learning requires a different mindset. Learning in the midst of activity and the flow of day-to-day emotions is difficult. We all suffer from hot cognition, cold cognition and tacit emotional processing (another way of putting it might be we all suffer from simplistic sensemaking, selfishness and prejudice). In order to learn effectively, we need to enter a calm, reflective and receptive state of mind where we are prepared to listen to both ourselves and others.

Adam Kahane quotes a colleague, Otto Scharmer, who talks about four kinds of listening.¹¹ The first is *downloading*, when we listen by evaluating and judging from within our own story (or from within our own living knowledge). We listen for what resonates with our own living knowledge and fail to hear what does not. In essence, we are listening for confirmation of our own beliefs and experiences. This is the opposite of learning.

The second form of listening is *debating*. This is when we listen and try to judge the objective ‘correctness’ or coherence of what is being said – either by others or by ourselves.

¹¹ Kahane, A. (2004) *Solving Tough Problems*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

The third form of listening is *reflective dialogue*. We no longer assume that we are stating truth, but recognize that we are sharing our own limited, but personally ‘true’, living knowledge. We also listen for the background story that is generating the contributions that others are making. We listen with empathy to their contributions and we challenge our own contributions more critically.

The fourth kind of listening is *generative dialogue*. This is more complex. Essentially, instead of simply listening for the individual truths inherent in each person’s living knowledge, you also listen from the vantage point of the whole system, sensing what it requires of everyone. This, partly, is a matter of integrity. It entails the ability to envisage and empathize with all the participants in the system, their needs and the needs of the whole. An example might be trying to listen to the individual stories of a German oil executive, a member of OPEC, an oil worker from Nigeria, an ‘environmentalist’ from the United States and an automotive worker from China, all within in the context and demands of the planet as a whole!

It is difficult to engage in generative dialogue during everyday activity. If we are to learn deeply and profoundly in a way that will make a difference to our societies and organizations, we need to invest time in learning ‘off-line’ – spending time on retreats and awaydays and learning to discipline ourselves to do what many of us find most difficult – really listening to people! It is only when we really listen to people, however, that we begin to learn.