

Emotional Awareness Builds Team Persistence

- Marcia Hughes, President, Collaborative Growth

The marketing team had been working long hours at ABC, Inc., a midsize company that produces office supplies. Team members were tired and feeling great pressure to finish their holiday marketing plan. They needed to complete their planning so the project could move into production. Yet, even though they were behind by several days, and they knew others were waiting on their final plan, there was still work to be done.

This scenario, in one form or another, is faced by many teams. Those teams all have choices about how to respond; they can run with this challenge several different ways. They can use their emotional and social effectiveness (“ESE”) to move forward with respect and synergy, or they could lose their cool and start yelling and rushing around. We all know what the preferred scenario is, but knowing what’s best and doing it are two very different steps.

While every one of the seven team ESE skills that are part of The Emotionally Intelligent Team are relevant to meeting this challenge, for this article, we’ll emphasize the powerful role that Emotional Awareness plays in successful resolution of the ABC team’s challenge. We also will discuss how tapping into it builds trust and credibility among the team and the organization.

Emotional awareness at the individual level requires understanding how you feel and why. It also includes communicating those feelings to others. Knowing how you feel requires a dedicated attention; sharing requires taking risks. When we take emotional awareness to the team level, the demands for effective awareness and responsiveness grow considerably. Not only do you need to know how you feel, what gave rise to the feelings, and be able to communicate it to others, you also need to be willing and able to understand and respond to the emotional information others provide.

Our book, *The Emotionally Intelligent Team* [Ed, please link this title to the flyer, and add a link from there to where they can buy it on Amazon] identifies and explores the six ingredients of team emotional awareness. We’ll highlight a few here.

Teams demonstrate the skill of emotional awareness when they take time to be aware of one another and of emotional responses that are relevant to their work. If Tim comes in with a huge grin on his face even if you’re in the umpteenth planning session, we certainly hope someone on the team will ask about the grin. You could find out any number of things, such as he just received a promotion, the team has been nominated for an award, or he just got engaged. A strong team takes a few minutes to understand one another, to connect. This is a big part of what can make work fun, which facilitates a more rewarding job and supports enhanced productivity.

It’s easy to check in when someone is happy; often it is harder to do so if they look angry, upset or withdrawn. Of course the amount of information you ask of a team mate needs to be appropriate and relevant to your work, but even if someone’s concern is personal, a simple supporting word can often make a big difference. You don’t need laborious details to understand that someone is facing challenges. It happens to all of us and we all benefit from a bit of encouragement or understanding. A team member giving Sally encouragement when she needs it can mean she volunteers to stay late and cover someone else’s position so they can go to their six year old’s first soccer game.



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But most people won't stay late or pitch in or take risks if they don't have an understanding of one another, a sense that you're in this team and accomplishing the job together. Esprit de corps, a sense of team energy and commitment, comes from knowing and investing in one another. It can't be built on a blank slate! Think of the folks who come to meetings two minutes after they start, leave the minute they are done and offer little while they're there. Or think of the folks who come in, growl and cross their arms, the whole time frowning. Do you trust either of these people? Do you play off their skills, build team synergy? Of course not, you don't have any data for building the connection.

Emotional awareness requires giving information, noticing and responding. It takes having comfort with emotions and exercising the courage to engage with one another. It often requires what we call graceful responses. That means you respond to the emotional data you receive with empathy, but also with your eye on the team's mission. It's this form of business oriented compassionate engagement that builds trust. To trust someone you must have information. That means team members share their hopes and worries about accomplishing the tasks before the team, it also means they respond to one another when the information is shared. Building trust happens by showing up, talking, responding, showing compassion and being honest and consistent. Using skills of emotional awareness builds every one of these attributes.

So let's go back to that first scenario with the marketing team at ABC, Inc. Let's say they have been building their emotional awareness muscles, so they make comments such as "I'm worried and frustrated that this isn't done yet." "I'm hopeful that we're just about to pull this together." Or "Everyone is under so much pressure for our plan, let's order pizza and stay late. I just know that if we kick into high gear together, we can make this happen!" Each of these emotional contributions are legitimate and quite possibly they're all showing up around the team. While stuffing them just makes things stiff and claustrophobic; sharing the emotions can lead to release, moans, laughter and renewed energy.