

## THE EMOTIONAL PROFILES TRIANGLE: WORKING WITH LEADERS UNDER PRESSURE

Leaders in any organization experience powerful psychological pressures. These go beyond the usual range of challenging tasks, difficult people-related issues and demanding workloads. Leaders face high expectations from their followers, which can reinforce a strong internal sense of responsibility. They are never “off stage,” attracting intense scrutiny from staff and stakeholders. They must project a confident image yet have few outlets for sharing their doubts and vulnerabilities.

The 2008-2009 recession and the fragile economic conditions since have confronted leaders with relentless uncertainty and change. They must take tough decisions to keep their organizations competitive while finding ways to motivate their people during lean times. While these pressures may weigh most heavily on senior leaders, they impact all those whose roles involve accountability for organizational performance and responsibility for managing others.

This article uses a new model and three case studies to illustrate what takes place when the emotional pressures on individuals become too great. The author argues that a level of anxiety is triggered that tips them into unskilful or dysfunctional behaviour. Even the most seasoned leaders are prey to this process, which has potentially destructive and far-reaching consequences for themselves and their people. By illustrating how anxious leaders can be helped to retain or regain their most effective selves through coaching, the article contributes to best practice in leadership development.

### **The Emotional Profiles Triangle**

This model emerged from the author’s first-hand experience of senior executives during 20 years in the field of leadership development. A striking pattern was observed – when leaders become emotionally overwhelmed, they fail to manage their mood and behaviour in one of the following three specific ways:

1. They become angry and blame.
2. They avoid conflict or difficult decisions.
3. They disengage emotionally.

While leaders may sometimes respond differently to different situations, the majority consistently demonstrate one of these responses. Moreover, there is a clear link between each of these problematic behaviours and three corresponding styles of effective leadership that can be characterized as follows:

1. Enthusiastic, energetic and task-focused.
2. Warm, inclusive and relationship-based.
3. Calm, logical and analytical.

These patterns underpin the Emotional Profiles Triangle (EPT), which presents three related sets of functional and dysfunctional leadership behaviours. It posits that all leaders fall into one of these three categories, moving back and forth along a spectrum between their most and least effective selves. The amount of time an individual spends in each “mode” depends on a combination of their emotional intelligence and resilience and external conditions and pressures.

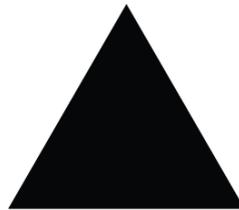
The EPT draws on psychodynamic psychology, which emphasizes the importance of emotion in driving behaviour and highlights the ways in which we attempt to defend ourselves, often unconsciously, against threats to our sense of psychological safety. It also draws on neuroscience, which explains the hardwiring that drives the human response to perceived threats.

### Three effective leadership styles

Figure 1 illustrates the three emotional profiles of leaders at their best and indicates how each style can deliver highly effective leadership. As individuals gain experience and mature, and especially if they invest in their own development, their competence in all three leadership styles will increase. However, each will retain a primary style, which comes most naturally. To maximize their contribution, they should be encouraged to hone this while expanding their repertoire to include skills that are characteristic of the other two profiles.

***At their best, leaders primarily demonstrate one of three effective leadership styles:***

**High-energy, passionate and driven, they are task-focused and like “getting things done”**



**Warm, inclusive and relationship-focused, they like building teams and developing others**

**Calm, cool and collected, they like an objective, logical, analytical approach**

Figure 1

### Three dysfunctional leadership styles

It is when leaders feel threatened or overwhelmed by the psychological pressures they are experiencing that an involuntary shift takes place and they move from effective, skilled behaviour to unskilful, destructive behaviour. Neuroscience reveals what happens from a physiological perspective. The small almond-shaped clusters of neurons deep inside our primitive limbic brains, called the amygdala, react to what we perceive as danger signals by flooding our bodies with adrenaline and other chemicals.

This switches us onto full alert, emotionally and physically and we attempt, like other animals, to defend ourselves in one of three ways – fight, flight or freeze. This process is triggered instantly, outside our conscious awareness, before the rational part of our modern brain is even aware of a problem. These three defensive mechanisms align closely with the dysfunctional versions of the three emotional profiles as illustrated in Figure 2.

**When pressure becomes too much, leaders tend to respond in one of the following dysfunctional ways:**

**FIGHT: Aggression is mobilized and they struggle to control their anger which results in critical outbursts, irritability or powerfully passive aggressive behavior**



**FLIGHT: Fear is mobilized and they struggle to control their fear, which results in passive or manipulative behavior and conflict avoidance**

**FREEZE: Feelings are shut down and they struggle to engage emotionally with others, which results in a sense of remoteness and lack of connection**

**Figure 2**

### **Leaders at the top of the triangle**

Individuals with this profile bring a high level of emotional, mental and physical energy to their leadership role. At their best, they embody passion, drive and determination and direct these towards achieving their tasks. They can be powerful and charismatic, respected and admired by their followers. They lead from the front, charging into battle with their standard held high.

However, when the pressure becomes too much, these task-focused, highly-emotional leaders tend to go into fight. The main driver of their anxiety is fear of loss of control, linked to their drive to achieve. As adrenaline floods their bodies, their capacity to control their own behaviour is reduced. Their energy is no longer constructively channelled into the task but spills out onto others in the form of angry outbursts, excessive criticism, indirect attacks, irritability or impatience. Uncurbed, this behaviour will generate fear, resentment, mistrust and a “blame culture” within their organization.

### **Case study: Sebastian**

A good example of this kind of leader was Sebastian, a talented and ambitious partner in the litigation division of a City law firm. He had a sharp intellect and excellent technical, client and business development skills, and led his sub-practice area with energy and enthusiasm. One aspect of his performance, however, was threatening to derail this promising career. When under pressure, usually in the midst of an important deal, Sebastian became extremely short-tempered with junior staff. His behaviour included irritability and snapping, withering criticism and, on occasion, angry outbursts. There had been several informal complaints and the word “bullying” was mentioned.

Sebastian entered coaching after senior managers insisted that this behaviour had to stop. It soon became clear that Sebastian was something of a perfectionist; he drove himself hard and also kept close watch on his team’s work to make sure it met his high standards. During client deals, he often became exhausted and began to feel overwhelmed and exploited. It then took only a small problem or a slip by a team member to trigger his fight reaction.

Feeling unsupported and out of control, he would vent his emotions in the form of anger and blame.

### **Leaders at the bottom left of the triangle**

These individuals also bring emotional energy to their leadership. However, this is directed primarily into relationships. Warm and inclusive, they focus on meeting their organization's needs through enabling others – building teams, nurturing talent and creating strong relationships. They can be great role-models, inspiring trust and affection in their followers. They lead from among their troops, with one eye always on their welfare.

When these relationship-focused, highly-emotional leaders move into dysfunctional behaviour, it takes the form of flight. The main driver of their anxiety is a fear of losing the approval of others. Their empathy with their colleagues is no longer constructively channelled into helping people succeed in their tasks. The acute discomfort caused by situations involving conflict leads to appeasing and avoiding behaviours – they delay taking difficult decisions or fail to stand their ground on important issues. Unchecked, this behaviour will create insecurity and frustration within their organization as staff feel vulnerable and uncontained and in-fighting develops to fill the power vacuum.

### **Case study: Daniel**

Daniel was a relationship-focused leader with this emotional profile. Universally liked by his colleagues, he was seen as a hard-working team player who delivered good results. However, Daniel's line-manager was keen for him to improve his leadership impact. He wanted him to become better at dealing with poor performers, taking tough decisions and holding his ground with powerful peers.

In the coaching it emerged that Daniel achieved a great deal through his friendly, inclusive interpersonal style, which enabled him to build strong relationships. Yet in situations involving potential conflict, Daniel quickly became anxious and moved into flight. A typical example involved a direct report, Gerhard, whose abrasive management style was causing continual problems with his own team. Daniel's light-touch attempts to raise this issue with Gerhard had been badly received. Although Daniel knew he needed to deliver firmer feedback, he found Gerhard's defensive response threatening. As a result, Daniel avoided addressing the situation, justifying his inaction through a string of unconvincing rationalizations.

### **Leaders at the bottom right of triangle**

These leaders do not bring a high level of emotion to work. They are consistently cool, calm and collected – self-contained individuals with a clear and logical focus on the organizational task. They can be steady, rational and objective, unflappable in a crisis, respected and relied upon by others. They go into battle alongside their followers, drawing on relevant data to provide direction with understated determination.

When overwhelmed, these leaders tend to become even less emotional and go into freeze. The main driver of their anxiety is a fear of being emotionally overwhelmed. Their calm and considered approach to getting things done becomes compromised. Their capacity to recognize their own feelings and connect with other people shuts down, they withdraw emotionally and often physically, and their people experience them as remote, uncommunicative and uncaring. Unaddressed, this behaviour creates uncertainty, frustration and low morale in their organization as staff feel ignored and demotivated.

### **Case-study: Nicola**

The UK managing director of a multinational financial services company, Nicola illustrates this emotional profile well. Having delivered excellent results, she was in line for possible promotion to European CEO. She sought coaching following an in-depth 360 degree

feedback process. She had received much positive feedback, particularly about her strategic and analytical skills. However, colleagues were less positive about her interpersonal style. They found her courteous and professional but felt she lacked warmth and was difficult to get to know. Direct reports would have liked more time with her. Several mentioned that, when stressed, Nicola became particularly distant and difficult to access. Some wished she would allow them to help her more during pressurized times.

Nicola wanted to address these issues yet she admitted that she did not particularly enjoy the people side of her role, especially “pandering to the emotionally needy,” as she put it. Even at her most relaxed, her style was self-contained and undemonstrative. When business problems arose – for example, the possible loss of a major client – her anxiety triggered a freeze response. Nicola withdrew, physically and emotionally, from her colleagues and failed to provide the level of communication and engagement with others that the situation demanded, so making it significantly worse.

### **The EPT as a development tool**

When the EPT was used with Sebastian, Daniel and Nicola, it proved useful in several ways:

- It helped each individual acknowledge their underlying issue without becoming defensive. As the model applies to all leaders, and each profile comprises both strengths and weaknesses, it protected their self-esteem and reduced the shame and vulnerability that simply focusing on their dysfunctional behaviour might have prompted. With Sebastian – hurt and angry at being called a bully – this played a particularly important role and helped reduce his initial defensiveness.
- The EPT also helped these clients develop insight into what was happening to them emotionally when they moved from the most skilled version of their leadership to the least.
- Daniel, for example, recognized just how anxious he became when facing possible interpersonal conflict and became much more honest with himself about his avoidant behaviour.
- Greater self-awareness led to identification of the key triggers that pushed each of them towards fight, flight or freeze. Thus Nicola realized that her anxiety was triggered by situations that she feared might lead to high levels of negative emotion from others.
- This in turn provided the basis for each leader to generate and implement practical new strategies for avoiding these triggers where possible and, where not, for managing their feelings and behaviour more effectively.
- The model also provided powerful motivation for these leaders to address their challenges. The clear link between the best and worst aspects of their leadership styles encouraged them to feel they could make progress. They were also spurred on by fully understanding the negative impact of their dysfunctional behaviour on their colleagues and organization.
- Finally, these leaders used the EPT to understand more fully the behaviour of others under pressure, whether bosses, peers or team members. Identifying colleagues’ emotional profiles shed helpful light on how they could manage these relationships more successfully.

So what were the coaching outcomes for Sebastian, Daniel and Nicola? Through reassuring Sebastian that he was not fundamentally a bully, while simultaneously emphasizing the

negative effects of his fight behaviour on others, the EPT helped him to accept the need to control the anger, which boiled up when he became overloaded. He began to set limits around his workload to avoid exhaustion and found ways of letting off steam away from his junior colleagues. With them, he focused on being more empathic and remaining cool, calm and collected under pressure. His aggressive behaviour in the office ceased and he went on to achieve promotion to equity partner a year later with the support of his senior colleagues.

For Daniel, the increased self-awareness that the EPT helped him gain represented a breakthrough. By exploring his discomfort with interpersonal conflict he learned to recognize his triggers and take responsibility for the negative effects on his team of his flight behaviour. Although confrontation remained anxiety-provoking, he committed himself to taking a more courageous and objective approach to addressing difficult issues, starting with Gerhard. Following careful preparation, Daniel succeeded in making it clear to him that a new approach to managing his team was essential and, through regular coaching, helped him achieve this.

Nicola was determined to make some changes in her leadership style yet felt reluctant to change too much, scared of becoming inauthentic. The EPT confirmed that her self-contained, unflappable style was a strength, while helping her recognize how much she emotionally withdrew when she felt threatened. She took some measured steps to share more of herself with others and, most importantly, learned to recognize when she was going into freeze. She worked hard to continue to engage with her colleagues even when this felt uncomfortable. Although she was not promoted to European CEO, she was offered another more senior role 18 months later.

### **A road-tested solution**

Since 2009, the EPT has been road-tested with a wide range of executive coaching clients and leadership teams and used in interactive sessions at conferences, seminars and workshops. Occasionally, individuals who have developed competence in the best versions of all three leadership styles are initially unsure of their profile. However, when the three dysfunctional styles are described, this almost always becomes clear. The rapid application of EPT to colleagues invariably follows, generating many “light-bulb moments.” Feedback about the conceptual and practical value of the model has been overwhelmingly positive. Comments have highlighted its practical value as an accessible coaching and development tool.

Current economic conditions underline the need for leaders to learn how to manage their emotions and behaviour when under pressure. The EPT provides a powerful lens through which leaders – and those seeking to support them – can understand what happens to them when their brains move into a high-alert, defensive state. This enables them to remain, or rapidly return to, their most skilled selves, with significant and far-reaching benefits for both the individuals and their organizations.

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