



## 'Grin and Bear It' Is Wrong. Here's What Great Leaders Understand About Emotional Intelligence.

*Effective leaders have figured out how emotional intelligence can work for them.*

“One of the things that I was told early on is that you should never let them see you sweat,” Ursula Burns once said in an interview. Burns, then-CEO of Xerox, was reflecting on leadership advice she had received over the years. She continued, “I remember hearing that and saying: ‘Oh, my God! I think that they have to see you sweat.’”

When I first read that interview, I was a few years into launching JotForm and was still figuring out my leadership style. I had figured that the best leaders were stoic types -- Teflon-strong with impenetrable poker faces. Burns' words were kind of a revelation.

Could emotions be a strength rather than a weakness?

In times of stress -- and in the startup world -- those are far from uncommon. Should entrepreneurs share, rather than smother their feelings?

As it turns out, the most effective leaders don't shy away from their emotions -- but they don't let them run wild either. It's all about striking a balance and learning to manage your feelings constructively. Your emotions can impact your team's morale and motivation. So, it's worth figuring out how to deal with emotionally charged situations in the workplace.

But first, have you ever considered why we don't want to quash our feelings entirely?

### **Emotional responses serve an important purpose.**

You've probably heard of these two main structures of the brain: the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. The former controls our emotional responses, triggering the sympathetic nervous system and the “fight or flight” reaction in times of distress. It's how our brain protects us from danger, instead of say, passing out (like those adorable fainting goats).

If the limbic system is our primitive brain structure, the prefrontal cortex is its evolved counterpart. It's the conscious element of the brain that allows us to reason, make deliberate decisions, delay gratification, and recognize the meaning beneath our emotions.

While the limbic system helps us to survive – it constantly scans the world for potential threats and responds as needed – problems arise when it controls too often, firing off responses in situations that aren't life-or-death, like when your boss gives you negative feedback or a colleague criticizes your work.

But in order to engage in high-level thinking, our prefrontal cortex must be in the driver's seat. Too much limbic system control and we literally can't think straight.

David Gray, author and founder of XPLANE writes:

*“When people are in the grip of fear, anxiety or depression, or chronic stress, they are unable to make realistic assessment of situations. The pre-frontal cortex goes ‘offline.’ Creative thinking and innovation, indeed, all higher-level brain functions, are stifled.”*

Our pre-frontal cortex enables us to regulate our emotions, too, and develop an important quality called emotional agility.

### **The benefits of emotional intelligence.**

According to Harvard Medical School professor Susan David and leadership coach Christina Congleton, the most effective leaders “don't buy into or try to suppress their inner experiences. Instead, they approach them in a mindful, values-driven, and productive way.” They develop what's called “emotional agility” – the ability to actively manage one's thoughts and feelings.

Writes Professor Susan David,

*“Emotional agility is a skill set that builds on our ability to face our emotions, label them, understand them and then choose to move forward deliberately. It is the ability to recognize when you're feeling stressed, be able to step out of your stress, and then decide how to act in a way that is congruent with your personal values and aligned with your goals.”*

This skill benefits entrepreneurs for various reasons.

Studies have found that possessing emotional agility helps people to alleviate stress, reduce errors, become more innovative and improve job performance.

A leader's ability to manage her emotions will impact her team's morale and motivation, too. If I've learned anything as a founder, it's that these two factors are critical. They're what keeps people showing up and doing their best work every day – regardless of their mood or whether or not they feel like it.

What's more, if we don't tackle our emotions head-on, they tend to resurface later, sometimes even stronger. In a widely cited study led by Harvard professor Daniel Wegner, participants who were told to avoid thinking about white bears had trouble doing so. More interesting still: later, when they were permitted to think freely, they thought about white bears even more than the control group.

To develop emotional agility, below are some strategies that I try to implement in my own role as CEO of JotForm.

### **Tips for developing emotional agility.**

#### **1. Recognize your emotions.**

Launching or running a company is inherently stressful. Though it's important to maintain your composure under pressure, evidence shows that you may be doing yourself a disservice by masking your emotions. Because recognizing your emotions is key to developing resilience – a critical trait for successful entrepreneurs.

“Unless we can process, navigate and be comfortable with the full range of our emotions, we won't learn to be resilient,” writes Professor David.

Next time emotions are running high, practice sitting with those feelings for a minute and acknowledging them. We tend to barrel from one task to the next without checking in with ourselves. But if we allow ourselves to really feel something, we can figure out how to deal with it effectively.

#### **2. Reappraise your feelings.**

Let's say you're about to give a presentation and your heart is beating so loud you're sure your neighbor can hear it. Instead of panicking, rename your nervousness as excitement. All of those symptoms – heart racing, palms sweating, senses acute – are your body preparing to do a bang-up job.

We often confuse emotions with similar physical symptoms. Reframing or reappraising a negative emotion in a more positive light can remove the sting. You might even realize that it wasn't so negative in the first place.

This reappraisal technique can have a powerful effect – not only will you feel better, but you'll perform better, too. In a 2014 study, Harvard professor Alison Wood Brooks found that participants who said "I am excited," before performing Journey's song "Don't Stop Believin,'" actually sang better, in spite of their nerves, than those who said "I am anxious," or nothing at all.

Researchers have also found that athletic coaches who tended to reappraise had more positive team climates, characterized by trust, communication, and motivation.

### **3. Expand your emotional vocabulary.**

Recognizing our emotions is the first step, but it's also important to label them precisely. According to psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett, developing a wider emotional vocabulary can help us to gain a deeper understanding of the situation we're in, and deal with our emotions effectively.

Rather than diagnosing a more general feeling, try digging a little deeper. So instead of describing yourself as "sad," after a product launch went awry, try "disappointed" or "frustrated." The same goes for positive emotions – instead of "happy," maybe you're feeling "inspired." With that additional insight, you might even be able to enjoy the experience with added relish.

**Let them see you sweat.** Running a company isn't for the faint of heart, but that doesn't mean you have to be a robot either.

As leaders, it's okay to experience the full range of our emotions – sometimes in the course of one day. Learning to manage those emotions is what emotional agility is all about. And it provides us important opportunities for learning and growth.

So instead of trying to cure or hide from your emotions, practice recognizing, reappraising and naming them with precision – even if it means letting your colleagues see you sweat once in a while.

**Continue the conversation at Emotions in Motion: The Dynamics of Emotional Intelligence for Leaders presented by JLA on January 14, 2020. For more information email [info@jlahartford.org](mailto:info@jlahartford.org).**

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