

## Stop Looking Through Dirty Water

An Excerpt from Managing Projects by Lou Russell

Imagine the difference between looking across the room through a glass of muddy water and a glass of clear water. The muddy water represents how our decision making is impacted by negative emotions. Our minds were designed to keep us safe. Every moment your brain is scanning around you to see what might threaten you. Luckily, most of us are not physically threatened very often, but our brain also picks up threats to our self-esteem.

The brain reacts to these threats by immediately moving into survival mode. In the learning field, we refer to this as a reptilian-brain response, the most primitive of our brain functions. It is an automatic response, so don't even try to stop it from emerging. Through hormonal intervention, the heart rate accelerates and blood is sent to the arms and legs so you are all set to punch or run as the need arises.

To focus on survival, the brain shuts down some of the frontal lobe where decision-making competence is located. Long-term memory is also shut down a bit, further degrading your ability to make a decision other than to run or fight back. In our current workplaces, this would be translated into hide/leave or yell/get angry.

There is some evidence that our brains were designed for one or two big threats a day, like a lion-sighting on the African plains. In our work lives, it is more likely that we will feel dozens of personal attacks during the day. Although these attacks are not as alarming, they exhaust the brain because it does not get the rest it needs to gear up for the next attack. Thanks to email, we get a constant stream of these attacks.

Izzy Justice's research in his book *Emotional Quotient* shows that after a significantly strong emotional threat, the brain has a four-hour "emotional hangover." For up to four hours you will be unable to make a good project decision.

I like to think of the reptilian-brain response as a rusty gate that's closing. At the beginning, the gate swings very slowly and can still be stopped from slamming shut. After a certain point of no return, the gate gains speed and slams completely shut, and the four-hour hangover begins. The trick is learning how to recognize that the gate has begun to close and mitigate the situation before the gate shuts completely.

A little stress is a good thing for creativity. The concept of cognitive dissonance is something we leverage in training design frequently. Leaving learners hungry for a little something motivates them to learn it. In projects, cognitive dissonance can be leveraged to help us become resilient and creatively come up with alternative plans. We tend to invest a lot in helping people grow awareness of their behavioral strengths (for example, DISC profiles). We train them in new competencies. And yet when people are stressed to the max, it knocks out all the great "building" that we have done.

Think of a project you were on recently, and write down a negative emotion you experienced. Rate that emotion from 1 to 10, 10 being the most extreme. Now write down three things that triggered that emotion

If you are like 90 percent of my students, you probably wrote *frustration* or *stress*. If your emotional gate is completely closed, you may have written stronger words like *rage*. One of my creative groups wrote *frankious*, a combination of *frustrated* and *anxious*. By understanding what triggers these types of emotional reactions, you can grow your emotional awareness and learn ways to regulate your natural emotions.

EQ assessments are also useful for learning about your emotional awareness and regulation. Emotional competence is not fixed at birth, and is something that you can grow with practice. Think of emotional maturity as growing these.

### **Emotional Maturity**

The *first step* is self-awareness. This is your ability to notice your emotions as they occur and identify the real reason they are happening. Howard Gardner wrote about this “intelligence” in a more recent book titled *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, which expanded his original seven Multiple Intelligences to ten. In projects, this intelligence, or competence, is extremely important because of our need to be able to make immediate great decisions under very stressful conditions.

Izzy Justice, mentioned earlier, recommends that you pick a stressful time of day (many people say 3PM in the workday) and set an alarm for that time (you might use your cell phone). When the alarm goes off, quickly make a note of your emotional state and the severity of your current state using a number from 1 to 10. After a week or so of charting your emotional state, you should have a good picture of how your emotions are interfering with your ability to be the amazing person you really are. Assessments are also powerful ways to look at your emotional awareness. If you are in the middle of a project, you might do this exercise every time you leave a project meeting.

With an awareness of the intensity of your negative emotional reactions, you can move to the *second step* of the process—regulation and discovery of what triggers these emotions. Ask yourself, “What happened that started the reptilian-brain response?” and “What in me was threatened by that trigger?” With that information you can find an answer to the most important question: “How can I regulate this negative emotion?”

It’s important to note here that the solution is not to avoid negative triggers or pretend that you are not experiencing a reptilian-brain response with a big, fake smile. This is clearly not healthy or helpful. Instead, imagine debriefing yourself on the event as you probe the root causes of your emotional reaction.

Justice’s research shows that we have 80 emotional experiences a year on average that we can learn from. Justice also says that most people learn or adapt from only three events. It won’t take much effort to improve that number for a project manager! Notice the emotion;

notice the trigger. Then challenge the validity of the assumptions that sent you down the trail to emotional shutdown.

Finally, in the *third step*, once you've made a little progress with your own awareness and regulation, you are ready as a project manager (aka leader) to help others. Show other team members how to start their journey so they can improve their project management decision making. You can't do this journey for others, but you can coach them by giving them the support they need, if they are willing.