

# Avoid Leading Under the Influence of Emotions

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## By Benjamin Martin and Stephen Marsar

Lieutenant Benjamin Martin knew he was angry. He could feel himself becoming more and more frustrated as one of his teammates continued to talk. Martin remembers thinking to himself at one point in the conversation: "I'm not sure of what is upsetting me more, the words he chose to justify his disdain of training more than once a cycle or his pessimistic view of the organization. This firefighter is always ready with a conspiracy theory about the secret agenda behind each leadership decision. Although never shy to second-guess someone else's judgment, lately he has become more openly disrespectful to his leaders and team. If it isn't the words he is using, perhaps it is the way he is staring at me, as if he were daring me to call him out on his ego, a result of his previous leadership's inability to have hard and challenging conversations with him over the course of his relatively young career. Nonetheless, his dissenting attitude has become a huge distraction on the shift, and it is starting to divide our team. Worse, our rookie is beginning to model his behavior."

It can be difficult to address performance issues at a two-company house, where the supervision of those assigned is split between two officers. On this particular day in the apparatus bay of our firehouse, an old-school truck officer and a young engine company officer met around a picnic table to discuss how best to right the ship. United in purpose, but approaching the issue with very different tactics, we knew we would have to acknowledge our missteps, insisting that this new culture of accountability starts with us. In his book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when the stakes are high*, Kerry Patterson tells us that statistically only one in 12 leaders will choose to have a difficult conversation such as this.

If you have been in a leadership position for any amount of time, then you know this next part: Leadership is messy and full of people's personal and professional problems. As such, it can be incredibly hard to initiate a conversation on a potentially sensitive subject while keeping the conversation on track, especially when emotions come out. Perhaps the hardest part of the impending conversation was the well-known fact that the employee's negative attitude was reinforced any time a leader failed to address his behavior. The sins of previous leaders are not always quickly forgotten by our teams, and just because we are new doesn't mean they are willing to give us a clean slate: "Well, the last officer didn't have a problem with this; so why do you?"

There was no doubt in our minds that this would be one of the hardest conversations we would ever have. But, as so many of us already in leadership positions know: "Organizational change often is not accepted until the pain of doing nothing becomes greater than the pain of making the change."<sup>1</sup>

Martin continues: When we asked the employee to join us in the bay to talk, we could tell

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Over the next hour, the three of us took turns at becoming angry. I tried to keep my cool, but I could not contain my disbelief of how callous and selfish his words were. As a result, the volume of our voices was raised, and the tone became more sarcastic and annoyed. The conversation proved extremely unproductive. As soon as the meeting ended, the employee stormed off, ready to start production in the firefighter rumor mill of how unreasonable his leaders had become while simultaneously looking for support to justify his actions.

Martin left the firehouse that day trying to figure out why the conversation had been such a disaster. After much soul searching and replaying, he identified the culprit—himself. He has learned since then that just because you care about the right things for the right reasons doesn't guarantee that you are an effective leader or that others will see you as such.

## **Do You Or Other Leaders in Your Organization Struggle to Engage Difficult Employees?**

If you've ever had to have a hard conversation about someone's performance, you know exactly what we're talking about—the employee often has prepackaged excuses for everything you present (often because it's not the first time he has heard this kind of feedback).

Leaders can fail to recognize just how much a successful outcome hinges on leaders' ability to control their emotions and to influence others' emotions. Consider this: The Center for Creative Leadership estimates that "75 percent of careers are derailed for reasons related to emotional competencies, including the inability to handle interpersonal problems, unsatisfactory team leadership during times of difficulty or conflict, or the inability to adapt to change or elicit trust."

This quote is highly representative of today's fire service. The public safety culture for decades has encouraged leaders to demand others to leave their feelings at home or to yell at their team when they make mistakes. As a result, there is a huge generational gap in which leaders are struggling to adapt and communicate to a new workforce—Millennials. This generation necessitates frequent and thoughtful feedback, which can be mistaken for being needy. In addition, this generation doesn't respond well when leaders yell or state, "because I said so." Everyone wants to feel valued and have it acknowledged that they know what they are doing when they show up at the fire station. If the narrative of the fire department is to adopt something new, it can threaten this feeling of value, especially in the more senior members. This feeling can quickly become toxic to an organization's morale, engagement, and mission. It's the same feeling that arises when unexpected transfers are issued or people are notified that they were not selected for promotion.

## **Are Hurt Feelings Really That Big of a Deal?**

The longer we serve in a leadership role, the more we have begun to realize that in most high-stakes conversations, especially those involving firmly held beliefs, facts aren't

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influence morale is such an important part of being a leader that Daniel Coleman, one of the foremost experts on emotional intelligence and leadership, highlights the ability to display social skills and express honest motivation as two huge factors toward successful outcomes related to creating support change in an organization. These two items are explored in more detail below.

So, although it's easy to dismiss feelings in the firehouse, morale is nothing more than just that: a summary of how we feel about what we are being asked to do. There is a very real and tangible cost to our organizations if leaders ignore how their workforce feels. A survey of 800 employees from 17 industries indicated that they responded to rude leaders in the following ways:

- Intentionally decreased their work effort, 48 percent.
- Intentionally decreased the quality of their work, 38 percent.
- Lessened their commitment to the organization, 78 percent.
- Took their frustration out on customers, 25 percent.

Other responses included a decrease in creativity, performance, and team spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Whether because of a lack of confidence or experience, many leaders will not have the difficult conversations. Difficult conversations are messy and can be full of emotions such as anger, resentment, and entitlement. It can be hard for leaders to control their emotions when they feel challenged in disagreements. Often, the outcome of these conversations is difficult to predict, so many leaders simply forgo having them. Instead, they act as ostriches with their heads in the sand, hoping that things will get better or go away. However, as most leaders know, that does not usually happen. The problems fester, escalate, or get transferred.

## The Five Traits of Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the ability to control your emotions and help to influence and regulate how others feel. This is a worthwhile objective especially since "People will remember 80 percent of how they *feel* during a conversation but only 20 percent of what was actually *said*," according to Gus Lee, leadership consultant and the author of *Courage*. Studies have shown that the following five areas are more reliable indicators of success than IQ. The good news is that you can learn and improve in these areas.

**Self-awareness.** Individuals demonstrate a keen awareness of and confidence in their strengths and humility about their weaknesses, are driven for the team first and themselves second, and are consistent with their values. More so, they are eager for constructive criticism and definitely aren't afraid to poke fun at themselves.

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and treat other people; and are comfortable when presented with challenges, change, or gray areas.

*Motivation.* These individuals aren't looking for a big paycheck or a slap on the back. The passion for the work is reward enough. They are curious, trying out new things to see what works and what doesn't, and they seem to have an irrational sense of optimism when faced with failure. They are intrinsically motivated and are able to shrug off bad days easier than most (but don't confuse this for a lack of pride in performance).

*Empathy.* This quality is hard to define at times. Essentially, it's the ability to understand, and even mirror when appropriate, how someone is feeling—the person's emotional makeup. Empathy leads to an increased ability to establish deeper relationships with and inspire people. These folks are easy to talk to, and you may find yourself reaching out to them to ask their opinion or bounce things off them.

*Social skill.* Any definition of leadership includes one's ability to influence others. Social skill is the ability to lead change and network. Key traits include the ability to persuade and motivate others while coming across as being authentic. Authentic leaders are those who despite their failures are still seen as credible in their organizations. Often, this is a result of their mastery of the aforementioned four traits.

## Applying the Five Traits of EQ

As leaders of emergency service professionals, we learn from examples. So how does EQ apply to our real world? Psychologist Abraham Maslow's 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" describes "self-actualization" in the same way as EQ describes self-awareness. "... Self-actualized people are those who are fulfilled and doing all they are capable of ... this occurs when a person experiences the world totally for what it is, and there are feelings of euphoria, joy, and wonder." Ah, the life of a fire service leader, all blue sky and puffy white Simpson clouds, right? Yeah, sure! Motivating ourselves and our members may break down into the steps Maslow suggested to achieve this level of awareness:

*Self-awareness: Experiencing this career and the understanding it offers us like a child, with full absorption, concentration, and wide-eyed wonder.* There's nothing more arrogant than a know-it-all firefighter. Pretending we have nothing to learn is the enemy of training, and it sends our new folks a dangerous message that could quite literally end up leading to injury or death. Self-aware leaders are confident in themselves yet know the reality that sooner or later everyone gets humbled in this profession—everyone. Your next humble moment may be right around the corner, on the very next alarm!

*Self-regulation and Motivation: Having the courage to try new things or embrace new ideas.* You should be a student of your craft and our profession, and you should be encouraging your members to do the same. Read trade magazines; attend the Fire Department Instructors Conference International; watch online fire scene videos; learn the new and up-and-coming trends, tools, equipment, and strategies; and yes, even review the newest

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always done them? One definition of “tradition” states: “Just because you’ve always done it that way doesn’t mean it’s not incredibly stupid.”

*Self-regulation, Motivation, and Empathy: Listening to your feelings in evaluating experiences instead of the voice of tradition, authority, or the majority.* Stick to your values; the basic tenets of firefighting; treating others as you expect to be treated; and the policies, procedures, and guidelines of your department. However, don’t let that stop you (or your department) from growing, moving forward, and remaining relevant. Evaluating your (and your department’s) experiences—both good and bad—is the best way to improve.

*Empathy and Social skills: Avoid pretense (game playing), and be honest with yourself and others.* All of us have strengths and weaknesses. Be humble in your strengths, and share them with others behind you. Don’t think of weaknesses as failures, or failures as an ending. Rather, use them to identify the weaknesses in yourself, your crew, and your department, and investigate ways to overcome them—challenging your people to do the same. People should be disappointed when they make mistakes.

*Self-regulation, Motivation, and Social skills: Be prepared to be unpopular if your views do not coincide with those of the majority.* You’re either on the train or on the tracks. However, even if you’re on the right track, when the train comes barreling down on you (whatever train that might be—political/regulatory/legal/financial/majority influences, so on)—if you’re tied down to that track (with stubbornness), you’re going to get run over. You must pick your battles. But, don’t be afraid to let your unpopular view be expressed. You just may want to act on the other issues when there’s a better or more correct time to approach or present them. Don’t agree with your boss just because he is your boss. Sometimes, superiors (including company officers) need to hear differing opinions so they can make more informed and intelligent decisions.

*Self-regulation, Motivation, and Social skills: Taking responsibility and working hard.* With leadership comes responsibility. That means taking the spotlight when things go right and sitting in the hot seat when things go wrong, even if one of your crew made the mistake. You will be taking the high road in both positions. You’ll be showing respect and loyalty to your crew while showing true leadership to your superiors.

*Self-awareness, Empathy, and Social skills: Trying to identify your defenses and having the courage to give them up, aka Could I be wrong?* We’re not talking about compromising your values here. Remain keenly aware that some of your beliefs may be uninformed, rooted in behavioral tradition, or not based on sound firefighting tactics or standards. Fire and emergency services officers can no longer get by with burying their heads in the sand. In fact, that is the surest way to get in deep, deep trouble. When the time comes that you find yourself conflicted (usually when your values and attitudes are in conflict or are being challenged) and want to dig in your heels and not budge on something, first identify why you are so locked into your defensive posture. Then, if it is rooted in sound facts, standards, best practices, or a gut feeling at an emergency, stick with it. Be confident in your position, and be willing to enlighten those challenging you. If you resort to stamping your feet

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opposition is based only on opinion, you may have to weed through the basis for that opinion and decide if it is valid or relevant.

## A Lesson in Being Uncomfortable

When handling difficult and uncomfortable situations with a supervisor, coworker, or subordinate, the first step involves making the decision to start the conversation. Choosing to have the conversation is often the largest, seemingly insurmountable obstacle to most leaders. Although this action might be uncomfortable and possibly upsetting to one or all of the members involved, it reinforces a culture of accountability and heads the issue off at the pass. Organizations have a great need for leaders willing to have “*the talk*” while maintaining control of their emotions (so as not to create strong, potentially destructive emotional reactions in others). When presented with disrespect, leaders must be capable of setting aside their anger and temptation to yell in pursuit of creating a space where both people can be heard. Knowing how and when to allow people to complain about you, the company, and the organization can take time to figure out, and leaders should be prepared to forgive themselves if they mess up a hard talk that they had with good intentions. EQ leaders are explicit with their concerns and use specific examples that illustrate the negative impact. To apply EQ, avoid hasty generalizations and allow the other person to give his side of the story. All of this is framed by a genuine interest in and empathy with their thoughts and feelings (whether you agree or not) and a conclusion to move forward with a course of action that preferably is agreeable to both parties.

The reality is that most conversations are a by-product of our investment—for good or bad. For example, in our first story, Martin clearly had not spent much time prior to that meeting explaining his motivation to the employee. As a result of his poor investment, instead of seeing the conversation as an expression of shared expectations from his leadership and a simple course correction, the employee saw it as an attack on his performance and took it personally.

Martin was rumored to be a change agent sent to fix problems. Whether true or not, this reputation stood in the way of his connecting with the team. Compounding this was the employee’s feeling that he was being attacked, which made him unwilling to even consider any facts offered about something he was doing wrong. The result was three people arguing, unable to figure out how to better express their points; they walked away more apart than when they sat down together.

EQ leaders can use their experience and leadership traits to create trust, which happens by investing in the team first and themselves second. Once this investment is made, leaders are better capable of rallying their team around whatever obstacle is facing them and keeping morale high as they do it.

## References

- 1 Larry Parker International Business Executive

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**Benjamin Martin** is a lieutenant with the Henrico County (VA) Division of Fire, where he is assigned to the training section. He has more than 15 years in public safety and speaks on leadership throughout the country. He has worked for years with the Virginia Fire Officer Academy and is a founding member of the Metro Richmond Public Safety Academy. He provides coaching for behavioral-based interviews and promotional assessment centers. He has written leadership articles for *Fire Engineering*, the Fire Department Training Network, the International Society of Fire Service Instructors, *FirefighterToolbox*, and *FirefighterWife*. He is the owner and operator of the leadership training featured at [www.EmbraceTheResistance.com](http://www.EmbraceTheResistance.com). He has a master's degree in public administration and a bachelor's degree in fire science.

**Stephen Marsar**, MA, EFO, CIC, is a 28-year veteran of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY), where he is a battalion chief. He is a former chief and commissioner of the Bellmore (NY) Volunteer Fire Department. His certifications include National Incident Safety Officer; FDNY IMT-Type 1 Unit Leader; National and New York State Fire Instructor level II; Department of Health Regional faculty member; and Certified Instructor Coordinator. He is an adjunct professor at the Nassau Community College, Long Island, NY, and a chief instructor for the FDNY and Nassau County Fire Service and EMS academies. He has a master's degree in homeland security and defense from the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, and a bachelor's degree in fire science and emergency services administration from Empire State College. He is a graduate, with honors, of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program, a Roll of Honor inductee, and a two-time winner of the FEMA's National Outstanding Research Award. He writes the Company Officer Development column for *FireRescue* magazine and is a *Fire Engineering* educational advisory board member.

Benjamin Martin will present "Intoxicated Leadership: Avoid Leading Under the Influence of Emotions" at FDIC International in Indianapolis on Friday, April 27, 10:30 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Stephen Marsar will present "Survivability Profiling: A Proven, Life-Saving Process for Firefighters" at FDIC International in Indianapolis on Friday, April 27, 10:30 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

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