
‘EMOTIONAL FORTITUDE’

Everyone pays lip service to the idea that leading an organisation requires strength of character. In execution it's absolutely critical. Without what we call Emotional Fortitude, you can't be honest with yourself, deal honestly with business and organisational realities or give people forthright assessments. You can't tolerate the diversity of viewpoints, and personal backgrounds that organisations need in their members in order to avoid becoming ingrown. If you can't do these things you can't execute.

It takes emotional fortitude to be open to whatever information you need whether it's what you like to hear or not. Emotional fortitude gives you the courage to accept points of view that are the opposite of yours and deal with conflict, and the confidence to encourage and accept challenges in group settings. It enables you to accept and deal with your own weaknesses, be firm with people who aren't performing, and to handle the ambiguity inherent in a fast moving, complex organization.

Emotional fortitude comes from self-discovery and self-mastery. It is the foundation of people skills. Good leaders learn their specific personal strengths and weaknesses, especially in dealing with other people, then build on the strengths and correct the weaknesses. They earn their leadership when the followers see their inner strength, inner confidence, and ability to help team members deliver results, while at the same time expanding their own capabilities.

A solid, long-term leader has an ethical frame of reference that gives her the power and energy to carry out even the most difficult assignment. She never wavers from what she thinks is right, this characteristic is beyond honesty or beyond integrity, beyond treating people with dignity. It's a business leadership ethic.

Leaders in contemporary organisations may be able to get away with emotional weakness for a brief time, but they can't hide it for long. They face challenges to their emotional strength all the time. Failure to meet these challenges gets in the way of achieving results. Getting things done depends ultimately on performing a specific set of behaviors. Without emotional fortitude, it's tough to develop these behaviours, either in ourselves or in others. How can your organisation face reality if people don't speak honestly, and if its leaders don't have the confidence to surface and resolve conflicts or give and take honest criticism? How can a group correct mistakes or get better if its members don't have the emotional fortitude to admit they don't have all the answers?

Putting the right people in the right jobs requires emotional fortitude. Failure to deal with underperformers is an extremely common problem in corporations, and it's usually the result of the leader's emotional blockages. Moreover, without emotional fortitude, you will have a hard time hiring the best people to work for you. Because if you are lucky, these people will be better than you are; they will bring new ideas and energy to your operation. A manager who is emotionally weak will avoid such people out of fear that they will undercut his power. His tendency will be to protect his fragile authority. He will surround himself with people he can count on to be loyal and exclude those who will challenge him with new thinking. Eventually, such emotional weakness will destroy both the leader and the organization.

In his book "Jack: straight from the gut", Jack Welch freely admits he made many hiring mistakes in his early years. He made a lot of decisions from instinct. But when he was wrong he'd say, "It's my fault." He'd ask himself why he was wrong. He'd listen to other people, he'd get more data, and he'd figure it out. And he just kept getting better and better. He also recognized that it's not useful to beat other people up when they make mistakes. To the contrary that's the time to coach them, encourage them, and help them regain their self-confidence.

How do you develop these qualities in yourself? The ultimate learning comes from paying attention to experience. As people reflect on their experiences, or as they get coached, blockages crumble and emotional strengths develop. Sometimes the 'aha's' also come from watching others' behaviour: your observational capabilities make you realise that you too have a blockage that you need to correct. Either way, as you gain experience in self-assessment, your insights get converted into improvements that expand your personal capacity.

Such learning is not an intellectual exercise. It requires tenacity, persistence, and daily engagement. It requires reflection and modifying personal behavior. But my experience is that once an individual gets on this track, his or her capacity for growth is almost unlimited.

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