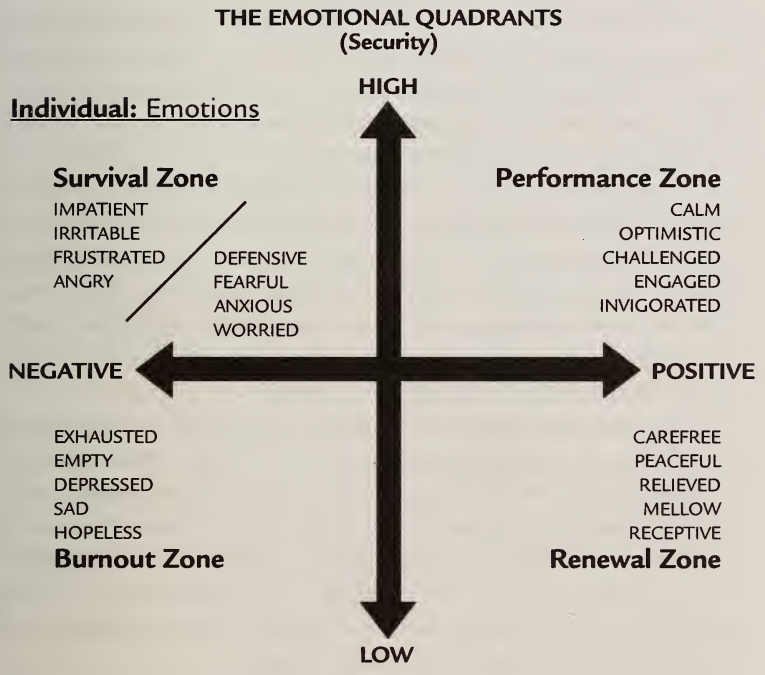
The War Between the States



How we feel profoundly influences how we perform. The problem is that much of the time, we're not even aware of how we're feeling, nor what impact those emotions are having on our effectiveness and on the people with whom we work.

Although "emotional intelligence" is now part of the vocabulary in many organizations, few leaders we've worked with are fully comfortable engaging their own emotions or managing the emotions of

others. For many of them, emotions remain messy, complicated, and often discomfiting. In too many companies, the unspoken expectation is that employees will park their emotions at the door when they arrive for work each morning. The most common mode of interaction is polite, bland, conflict-avoidant and often inauthentic. When strong emotions are expressed at all, they tend to be the reactive and negative ones that arise under stress, and they're usually tamped back down as quickly as possible.

But emotions influence us, and those around us, whether we consciously recognize them or not. The more aware we are of what we're feeling at any given moment, the more power we have to influence how we're feeling. Skillful management of our emotions creates the potential for better relationships and for greater effectiveness at work.

There are four basic ways we can feel over the course of the day. They're depicted in the Emotional Quadrants, on the previous page. The vertical axis refers to the quantity of our energy, from low to high. The horizontal axis refers to the quality of our energy, from negative to positive. The result is four zones that describe in broad terms how we're feeling at any given time. There are subtler gradations of each emotional state across both axes, but for most of our clients, the four states are readily recognizable.

Take a few moments before reading any further to think about how you feel when you're performing at your best. What adjectives come to mind? Now write them down. How would you characterize what they have in common? Over the years, we've asked this same question of thousands of people—athletes and artists, heart surgeons and ICU nurses, teachers and students, cops and corporate executives. With very few exceptions, they describe feelings associated with the upper-right quadrant: high positive energy.

We call this the Performance Zone, and it's the best place to be when you're working toward a specific goal, whether that means sitting in front of a computer, leading a meeting, competing on an athletic field, performing a heart transplant operation, or taking an exam. It's no big news that positive emotions are associated with performing at your best. In all likelihood, you came up with a list of adjectives close to those in the upper-right quadrant.

What's less obvious is that we can't perform at our best when we're not in the Performance Zone. Put another way, any time you're not

feeling optimistic, engaged, upbeat, focused, enthusiastic, and committed, you're suboptimal. For most of us, there are significant periods of time when we're not feeling those emotions at work. That prompts a second question: "When you're not in the Performance Zone, where are you, and what are the consequences?"

In terms of the quadrants, there are three other possibilities. Only a tiny percentage of our clients say that they spend any significant time at work in the lower-right quadrant, feeling relaxed, peaceful, laid back and serene. Despite what we've said about the power of intermittent renewal, it remains both counterintuitive at a personal level and countercultural in the vast majority of organizations.

That leaves the left-hand quadrants, both of which are characterized by negative emotions. Many of us find ourselves in the Burnout Zone—lower left—after intense periods of stressful work. But typically it's not a place people stay in for long. On the most obvious level, it's the worst zone from which to work. If you spend much time there, it's likely to put your job in jeopardy. It's also hard to imagine an employee telling a boss, "I'm feeling kind of hopeless and depressed today." Instead, the vast majority of clients tell us that when they're not in the Performance Zone at work, it's because they've fallen into the Survival Zone, or upper left. Unlike the Renewal Zone and the Burnout Zone, the Survival Zone is an acceptable place in which to operate in most organizations. Expressing anger, fear, frustration, and impatience—the characteristic emotions of the Survival Zone—is all too common in the workplace. In addition, many leaders still rely heavily on negative emotions to generate the results they're after.

FEAR CENTRAL

Few of us intentionally choose to work from the Survival Zone. Instead, we move there reactively and instinctively when we perceive a sense of threat or danger—a conflict that arises with a client, colleague, or boss, or an external event such as a sudden deadline or a disappointing outcome. At the physiological level, the Survival Zone represents a fight-or-flight response. It's triggered by the amygdala, a small, almond-shaped region in the midbrain below the cortex that processes emotion and that the neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux has

termed "fear central." Among other things, the amygdala prompts activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which responds by flooding adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol into our bloodstream. These stress hormones prompt a series of physiological responses, including increased heart rate, narrowing of vision, muscle contraction, and the flow of blood from the brain into the trunk. Each of these responses increases our ability to either fight or flee.

In physiological terms, we have two distinct selves, and they operate with very different agendas and often at cross-purposes. We refer to the conflict between our parasympathetic nervous system, which calms us down, and our sympathetic nervous system, which arouses us, as "the war between the states." In parasympathetic arousal, the self we're aware of operates under the aegis of our prefrontal cortex. It has a limitless ability to learn and grow. In this state, we're capable of making rational choices based on a careful consideration of the costs and benefits. Our second, more primitive self, run by our sympathetic nervous system, falls under the province of our limbic system—emotions, impulses, instincts, and habits. This self runs automatically and reactively, mostly outside our conscious control, and is designed to ensure our immediate survival and safety. It's incapable of reflective thinking.

"Remove the convoluted frontal cortex from a human brain," writes the psychiatrist Ian McCallum, "and you will be faced with an individual who is both disturbed and disturbing, grossly lacking in insight and without any sense of consequence. . . . Without the frontal lobe, we lose what is arguably the most important ability of human socialization—the capacity to deliberately inhibit our actions. We lose our ability to regulate our behavior."

A hardwired response to danger was especially useful to us thousands of years ago, when we faced life-or-death threats from predators every day. Today, we rarely face such dangers. Our bodies, however, don't make the distinction between a real threat to our survival and our more everyday fears. An angry boss, a conflict with a colleague, a difficult deadline, a dissatisfied client, an imposing workload or an unreturned phone call can all prompt our fight-or-flight response. The problem is that when our survival isn't literally at stake, the benefits of fight-or-flight are often far outweighed by the costs.

The first ones are to our health. Cortisol, for example, is a catabolic

hormone, and its function is to break things down. That serves us well in many situations. For example, cortisol breaks down fats and carbohydrates and increases glucose in the bloodstream, which gives us greater energy. But when cortisol circulates in our bodies for too long, too continuously, it effectively turns into a poison. It can undermine our ability to learn by damaging the hippocampus, the seat of memory in the brain. It can also severely weaken the immune system by interfering with normal T-cell production, and it has been linked to a range of illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease. "It's vital to our health that we pay very close attention to how much time we spend hooked into the circuitry of anger, or the depths of despair," explains the neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor, who wrote the best-selling book *My Stroke of Insight.*

The second cost of the fight-or-flight reaction is that it inhibits the activity of our prefrontal cortex, which largely shuts down when the sympathetic nervous system takes over. That's for good reason: conscious thinking actually slows the speed of our reaction to life-threatening danger. It takes our prefrontal cortex as much as two full seconds to register and respond to an imminent danger. The amygdala can recognize and react to a perceived threat in as few as two-hundredths of second, something the psychologist Jonathan Haidt refers to aptly as "a neural shortcut." But this instant reactivity doesn't serve us well when the challenges are complex but not life-threatening. In fight or flight, we lose the capacity to calmly and clearly think through the best possible response to the situation at hand.

At the most basic level, we sacrifice reasoning power. With reduced cognitive capacity, we also tend to become more concrete and to think less creatively and strategically. More broadly, we lose the capacity to take into account the long-term consequences of any given behavior, not least because our vision in fight or flight literally narrows to home in on the immediate threat. Fear also begets fear. When the amygdala is chronically aroused, the brain becomes hypervigilant, often sensing danger even where it doesn't truly exist. The classic example is the posttraumatic stress disorder many soldiers experience when they return from fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. What served them well in war makes their everyday lives dysfunctional. Their fear of attack can become so heightened that any sharp noise may prompt behaviors

ranging from paralyzing panic, an extreme form of flight, to unprovoked violence, an extreme version of fight.

Fear and fury may be a fuel for action, but in most situations they undermine our performance. Imagine for a moment that someone you love is about to undergo brain surgery, or that a pilot has to land the plane you're on in the midst of a heavy storm, or that your child's teacher must figure out how best to respond in an emergency. Would you rather the person in charge of these situations be feeling frustrated, angry and terrified, or calm, composed and clear-thinking? The answer is self-evident. It's no different when *you* are the person facing a crisis.

The same is true at the organizational level. The revered management guru W. Edwards Deming grounded his work in the attempt to drive fear out of organizations. "It is unbelievable what happens when you unloose fear," he said. "Fear takes a horrible toll." After surveying the research, Daniel Goleman concluded that "The more intense the pressure, the more our performance and thinking will suffer. . . . The greater the anxiety we feel, the more impaired is the brain's cognitive efficiency."

THE CHIEF ENERGY OFFICER

The third problem with negative emotions is their impact on others. The research is increasingly clear that all emotions are contagious, for better or for worse. We often ask our clients to describe the qualities of a leader they've especially admired or viewed as a role model or a mentor. Think about this yourself. Who would you choose, and what adjectives would apply? Again, take a few moments to write down your answers before continuing.

We've asked this question hundreds of times, and here are the ten most common answers:

- Encouraging
- Inspiring
- Kind
- Positive

- Calm
- Smart
- Visionary
- Supportive
- Decisive
- Fair

No one has ever said to us, "What I loved about my boss is how angry he got. It showed me how much he cared." Or: "I loved his impatience. It really kept me on my toes." Negative emotions may fuel action, but they don't inspire people. To the contrary, the research suggests that leaders who operate from anger and negativity literally have the power to make their employees sick.

One study examined health care workers who had two supervisors, one they liked and the other whom they couldn't stand. On the days the bad boss worked, the average blood pressure of the workers jumped from 113/75 to 126/81, an increase from normal to nearly hypertensive. In another study, workers who felt unfairly criticized by a boss or felt they had a boss who didn't listen to their concerns had a 30 percent higher rate of coronary disease than those with bosses they felt treated them fairly and were concerned with their welfare.

We think of leaders as "chief energy officers." The core challenge for leaders, we believe, is to recruit, mobilize, inspire, focus, and regularly refuel the energy of those they lead—to nudge them toward high positive. In a metareview of more than two hundred leadership studies, the researchers Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans found only one quality among leaders who consistently had a positive impact on others. The best leaders were able to see in others positive qualities these employees didn't yet fully recognize in themselves. But how often do leaders play this role—raising the confidence of those they lead—especially when they themselves are feeling under pressure? Leaders are no less vulnerable than the rest of us to feeling threatened and overwhelmed or to reacting from fight or flight. What sets leaders apart is their disproportionate influence on those they lead, by virtue of their position and power. Whatever they're feeling reverberates through the workplaces they oversee.

"I'd always assumed it was perfectly reasonable for me to get upset with someone who screwed up or wasn't pulling his weight," explained Fred, a senior leader at a leading financial institution. "How else was I going to get the person to change? What I came to understand is that if I had a tough conversation with someone and he left my office feeling fearful or angry or put down, he wasn't going to be capable of going back and doing his best work. The conversation was actually counterproductive. I still believe you have to use high negative sometimes to get a person's attention, when nothing else is working. What I try to do now is be sure I'm making a choice to use negative emotions. When I do have a tough conversation with someone, I try to end it with that person knowing I believe in him and I'm confident he can get the job done. If I ever stop believing that—and communicating that—it's probably time to let the person go."

The final cost of high negative emotions is that they quickly deplete our energy. If you spend too much time in the Survival Zone, you'll eventually end up in the Burnout Zone, which is plainly the worst place from which to perform. Athletes understand this phenomenon at a visceral level. In his autobiography, John McEnroe discusses the toll that getting angry took on his performance. "My shtick, of course, was getting upset," he wrote. "Did it help me more than it hurt me? I don't think so. Ultimately my father was right—I probably would have done better if I hadn't ever gotten into that." Great as he was, McEnroe won his final grand slam tournament at the age of twenty-five. Anger took an insidious toll on the length of his career.

The energy cost of negative emotions may not be as obvious for those who work in jobs with minimal physical demands, but the toll shows up in subtler ways. Think about a day during which you're feeling anxious, and the impact that has on your ability to focus. How much does an angry confrontation take out of you? What's the cost to your commitment and your productivity if you have a boss you actively dislike?

EMOTIONAL RENEWAL

The antidote to falling reactively into the Survival Zone is to intentionally spend more time in the Renewal Zone. If fitness is defined as

the speed of recovery physically, resilience is the speed of recovery emotionally. At a physiological level, the issue is not how high the level of cortisol spikes in our system during the fight-or-flight response but how quickly it returns to normal levels. "It takes less than ninety seconds for limbic system programs to be triggered, surge throughout the body, and then be completely flushed out of our systems," explains Jill Bolte Taylor. "If you stay angry after ninety seconds, it's because you've chosen to stay angry."

Regularly accessing positive emotions is the key to avoiding the Survival Zone. Much as our reservoir of physical energy is drawn down inexorably over the course of the day, so the more difficult challenges we encounter at work deplete our reservoir of positive emotion. Physical and emotional energy are inextricably connected. The way we take care of ourselves physically has a profound influence on our emotions. We feel better after a good night's sleep, and we're emotionally rejuvenated after a run or a good workout. Indeed, the simplest way to regenerate positive emotion is to challenge yourself physically, especially after you've been sitting in front of a desk for several hours, or to rest or sleep when you're truly exhausted. Conversely, succeeding at a difficult task at work, having a great conversation with a colleague, or doing something you deeply enjoy during a break not only lifts your spirits but also energizes you physically.

It's in our self-interest to cultivate positive emotions, not just because they make us feel good but also because they fuel more productivity and effectiveness across all dimensions of our lives. We often allow ourselves to be pulled into the Survival Zone by the people around us and by the events that occur over the course of the day. But even in the face of the most stressful demands, we have the power to profoundly influence how we feel. The key is learning how to pulse rhythmically between the Performance Zone and the Renewal Zone, so we regularly refuel our reservoir with positive energy.

CHAPTER TEN ACTION STEPS

- The more aware we are of what we're feeling, the more we have the power to influence those feelings. Set aside two to three specific times during the day when you ask yourself what emotional quadrant you're in. If it's one of the negative left-hand quadrants, take a few moments to try to understand what put you there.
- The antidote to falling reactively into the Survival Zone is to intentionally spend more time in the Renewal Zone. Make a list of activities that you enjoy most and which make you feel best. Intentionally schedule at least one of these activities into your life each week.
- Energy is contagious. What effect does your energy have on those around you? If you're a leader, the effect of your energy is higher by virtue of your position. After any conversation you're in, take a moment to ask yourself whether the person you were talking to walked away feeling better or worse than when the conversation began. Either way, how did you contribute?