THE COST OF FEAR

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Minimising fear's role

Fear is the most powerful emotion for reasons of survival. But, conditions in the knowledge economy are vastly different from the pre-historic times that shaped brain mechanics.

Even though threat type has changed, primal fear circuitry still looms large – and it often devastates higher-order thinking. Here's how to minimise its role in the workplace.

1. Be alert to the primacy of fear circuitry and its potentially negative impact on high order thinking.

2. Check your own responses. Are they triggered by some variation of the fear response which is unjustified in the context? Will your instinctive reaction be the most productive in the circumstances?

3. What impact is your intent and behaviour having on others? Remember their mirror neurons will be unconsciously picking up and mimicking your signals. This can be used to promote a positive climate where fear is replaced by hope and optimism – which supercharge higher order thinking.

4. Realise this is not about 'soft' attitudes and emotions. Rather, it's goes to the basic functioning of the human brain. We can harness this understanding for great benefit.

Exasperation

Wendy clicked the send button, sighing with relief that she'd completed the tricky draft document. It had taken her longer than expected. In fact, she'd stayed the previous night to meet her tight deadline.

Co-worker Tom, expecting the draft, opened it immediately it entered his in-box. The early part of the document was outstanding. Wendy framed a compelling proposal, including some new perspectives the team hadn't discussed.

But reaching the final paragraphs, Tom realised the numbers in the proposal were out of date. Wendy had used an older document. Tom's demeanour changed instantly as he realised Wendy had again misfiled circulated materials. It didn't take long to recognise that he'd need to rework that section – and there wasn't much time left.

Needing to rework the proposal unnecessarily, because of repeated misfiling, provoked instant frustration. Tom strode across to Wendy. Forgoing niceties, in a calm but clearly annoyed tone, he told her how exasperated he was that she couldn't follow filing protocols. He also expressed annoyance at having to rework the document unnecessarily. He returned to his desk to complete the work.

Tom's unexpected annoyance threw Wendy. Instead of completing the next deliverable, she instantly started reflecting on how the error had occurred. It wasn't intentional. For the following 30 minutes Wendy could not progress her second important task. Tom did manage to move along, but without the creativity and insight that characterised his work.

Fear at the forefront

Brain science gives an interesting explanation for what happened between Tom and Wendy. It may be useful in your workplace because similar unhelpful exchanges occur countless times, in many organisations every day.

Fear, one of the most primal and powerful emotions, permeated the exchange. According to psychiatrist and neuroscientist, Dr Srinivasan Pillay, fear taxes the unconscious brain. In Tom's brain, the error-detection circuitry noted the mistake in the report. It immediately sent a strong, negative emotional signal to the amygdala (the emotion relevance processing centre), to get his attention. It certainly managed that. Pillay points out the amygdala is a "supersensitive fear detector" and fear is the brain's dominant emotion.

What if he'd also missed the error and they'd presented to the team, or worse, the client? Similar errors, in other contexts, had caused him embarrassment and pain. The memories were powerful and quickly recalled and triggered.

The amygdala processes all emotions on a priority basis. Fear tops the list because of its close link to survival. It often sweeps aside other emotions until the sensed danger subsides. So, although Tom's thoughts towards Wendy had been positive only moments before, the error unconsciously triggered fear which activated his next, almost automated response.

Contagion

When Tom confronted Wendy quite suddenly, her fear circuits activated instantly. She didn't feel in any physical danger but the unconscious emotions in play were very similar to Tom's. Her mirror neuron circuitry heightened her state of alarm.

Mirror neurons cause your brain to mimic the actions of someone you're observing. Other circuitry inhibits you from physically acting this out, but essentially your brain sets off internal processes, as if it was your own behaviour. Interestingly, your brain even picks up and mirrors the intentions of others. So Wendy's negative mental state heightened as her mirror neurons picked up and mimicked the negative signals that Tom was transmitting.

The impact of fear circuitry

Neither Tom nor Wendy were very productive for a period following the exchange, thanks to the impact of fear on the amygdala. When fear activates the amygdala it consumes processing time, placing lower priority emotions in a holding-pattern. Because of its links with multiple brain regions, a fear response impacts on other brain functions, including decision making.

Only later did Tom recognise how counter-productively he'd behaved. Like Wendy, he had not intended to impact productivity, but that occurred. How could this have played out differently?

"Cut. Take two."

Tom noted the excellent ideas Wendy included. Then he noted the error. Instead of confronting Wendy, he corrected it to meet the deadline. A chat about the oversight would occur later, at an appropriate time. Tom reflected again on her great work and commitment. Her intention to deliver excellent outcomes triggered his mirror neurons.

Although this activated his amygdala, emotions were positive and optimistic. Under these conditions his thinking brain operated in top gear. He corrected the error in no time and added useful insights. Wendy, meanwhile, powered ahead undisturbed, creating an excellent second document.

Does some variation of this scenario ever play out in your workplace? Every time it does, it brings unwanted and unnecessary costs. It's definitely worth trying to avoid it.

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