

Ombuds Outlook — January 2018

Ombuds/Dispute Resolution Services for Faculty
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Why Do I Need You?? Emotion, Empathy and The Brain

In a PBS/BBC six-part television series on *The Brain*, Episode 5 is titled “Why Do I Need You?” It covers topics from infancy to adulthood, healthy and damaged neural connections, and impact of others on one’s perceptions. The emphasis is on neural interdependence which underpins our need to group together, and our ability to do the very best and the very worst of things to each other.

Dr. David Eagleman explores how the brain’s neural interdependence begins at birth. In one study, he observes a group of babies watching a puppet show to showcase their ability to discern who is trustworthy, and who isn’t. As we grow up it becomes important for us to be able to understand, and decode, the intentions of others. Dr. Eagleman reveals two ways in which the brain does this. First, we unconsciously mirror the facial expressions of others, which allows the brain to get a sense of how another person feels. Second, the brain mirrors other people’s emotions at a deeper level. Brain scans reveal that when we see someone in pain, we feel it too. Circuits within the brain’s pain matrix light up in both cases. And this is the basis of empathy: one brain unconsciously simulating another’s, feeling what that person is feeling.

Eagleman also examines the role of emotion in how we maneuver through social interactions. Ultimately, he argues that the brain is designed to need people. Humans seek meaning to understand social narratives. Without social interactions, the brain suffers and seeks collective interactions. Several experiments on being left out, and in the extreme case of being imprisoned in social confinement, reveal what is referred to as the brain’s pain matrix. This creates an understanding of in groups and out group dimensions.

In his book **Empathy**, Krznaric reported that (1) neuroscientists have identified a ten-section “empathy circuit” which, if damaged, can curtail our ability to understand others’ feelings; (2) evolutionary biologists have shown that we are social animals who have naturally evolved to be empathic and cooperative, and that such cooperation, even survival, requires being in tune with others; and (3) child psychologists have found that children as young as three years old are able to step outside themselves and see other people’s perspectives.

Canadian researcher Obhi suggests that when people become powerful, a default brain mechanism may cause them to lessen or lose empathy. When people were put in a more powerful state, their sensitivity to others decreased, including their ability to put themselves in the other’s shoes. Obhi found that feelings of increased power shut down the neurological mirroring system.

Discussion for a future Ombuds Services workshop will revolve around the notions of empathy with specific attention to challenges for empathy in the workplace.

The PBS series on *The Brain* can be retrieved most easily by doing a browser search for: David Eagleman, *The Brain*, Why Do I Need You?

Krznaric, R., 2014. Empathy. NY: Perigee.

Obhi, Z., referenced in When power goes to your head, it may shut out your heart, NPR, August 10, 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/10/210686255/a-sense-of-power-can-do-a-number-on-your-brain>

The New Face in Leadership: Emotional intelligence

While our rapidly changing work environments are often riddled with conflict, the ability to be in-tune with ourselves and others is key. Greenockle (2010) proposes that inspiration must be added to the more traditional top-down, autocratic approaches of leadership, and emotional intelligence is a paradigm that effectively meets this need. Popularized by Daniel Goleman (2006), emotional intelligence (EI) is recognized as a set of affective skills that values feelings. It seeks to strengthen interpersonal relationships and pursue cooperation and teamwork. Greenockle suggests that intellectual and emotional quotients are two halves of a whole person. The intellectual quotient measures ability to learn and brain power. It is fixed at birth and is stable over time. The emotional quotient involves our ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions. It is flexible and can be developed, augmented, and nurtured.

The four components of EI are self-awareness, self-management, self-motivation, and communication skills. Considered the 'smoke alarm' of EI, self-awareness influences our reactions and success in the workplace. Through self-awareness, we are cognizant of our feelings, take courage in exploring our reactions to people and events, and use that information to guide decision-making. Low self-awareness in the workplace might allow us to hold on to negative feelings, permit others to evoke emotions/ behaviors by their presence, or experience long delays in recovering from an insult or offense. Self-management is indicative of our ability to remain flexible and positively direct our behavior in ways that lead to success in all facets of life. It involves taking charge of our thoughts or appraisal of others and events, arousal reactions or physiological changes, reaction tendencies, and the emotional context of our workplace experiences. Effective self-management techniques include pausing, deep breathing, taking a time out, positive self-talk, use of pre-rehearsed phrase or statements to avoid over-reacting, keeping emotions out of emails, and having a colleague with whom we can vent.

Self-motivation and communication are also important. Self-motivation seeks to maintain enthusiasm, confidence, optimism, and resiliency in the face of setbacks. By developing an 'A-team' (supportive colleagues, friends, and family), we can identify emotional mentors and enhance our environment to set and continually achieve meaningful goals. Having mutually motivating relationships and emotional mentors helps us to foster an inspiring, healthy workplace. In addition, we must effectively employ communication skills exhibited by clearly conveying to others what we feel, think, and want. Skillful communicators have dynamic listening abilities, are assertive, and can skillfully engage in self-disclosure.

While conflict may be necessary and valuable, managing it in an emotionally sensitive way is paramount to workplace success. Through empathy and continually evolving EI, we will be able to understand and act upon the concerns of others and inspire cooperation that leads us to promote a positive work environment and higher productivity.

Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. NY: Random House Bantam Books,

Greenockle, K.M. (2010). The New Face in Leadership: Emotional intelligence. *Quest*, 62, 260-267. The National Association for Kinesiology and Physical Education in Higher Education.