

The Emotional Process Leadership Model

(If you aren't aware of a model you can't use it)

a HealingLeaders Whitepaper

by

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A Fish Tale

A story is told of two fish hiding under a dock where a father and son were fishing. After listening to the father and son talk for a while, the fish heard them speak of a strange and wonderful new substance they called “water.” Intrigued by this mysterious and wonderful sounding thing, one fish announced to the other, “I have to go on a quest and find this thing called water. Despite his friend’s admonitions regarding the danger of the unknown world beyond their own, the curious fish left.

Years went by with no word from the adventurer. His friends and family had given him up for dead. Then one day, to their surprise, he returned. They rejoiced at his homecoming. When they could no longer restrain themselves, they finally had to ask, “What did you learn about water? Did you find it?” The weary

traveler just looked at them and said, “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

What if there were a secret substance that permeated every leadership situation; something that was so subtle and so close to us that we don’t notice it? What if it turned out to be more crucial to the success of leadership than all of the other elements that dominate our thinking?

A convergence of findings from modern-day research indicates that there is a hidden emotional field that powerfully influences every human interaction. This emotional field cannot be observed under a microscope. Like the air we breathe, it is tasteless, odorless and colorless. Unlike the traditional model of leadership, this new awareness indicates to us that leadership is essentially an emotional process.

Whether we know it or not, we as leaders operate out of our own internal model (or map) that explains how people respond to change in their lives. We also use this internal model to predict behaviors in others and therefore guide our leadership strategies toward our preferred outcomes. For the first time since the Great Enlightenment, we have a choice regarding what model we will use to approach the tasks and the challenges of modern leadership. Awareness of a leadership model gives us the power to use it, not only as a lens for understanding the present but as a compass for plotting our future.

The Traditional Social Science Model

The model that most of us use is what Dr. Edwin Friedman calls the “social science model.” He observes that this is rooted in 19th and 20th century discoveries in psychology, anthropology and sociology. The social science model basically views leadership as a combination of strategies and skills that anticipate reward and punishment, cultural norms, gender differences and developmental differences to predict how people will change. The social

science model emphasizes the importance of communication skills, carefully crafted content, strategic timing, and the skillful execution of persuasive techniques that encourage people in the direction invited by the leader. Essentially it is a “marketing approach” subservient to the vision of the leader. In this model, success depends on the skill and determination of the leader to execute various methods and techniques.

Limitations of Traditional Social Science Model

There is one problem with the social science model. It consistently fails to predict group behavior and leadership outcomes. This limitation is evident in the following ways:

1. Problems in families and organizations persist across generations of leadership. With its focus on the skills of the leader, one would expect the presence of a new leader to be a panacea to the many ills befalling the untold number of dysfunctional institutions and organizations of our day. Indeed, American culture seems to be uniquely obsessed with the “myth of the coming

Messiah” – the idea that the right person at the right time can perform miracles in leadership positions. This myth is especially prevalent during presidential elections. The names and faces of the leaders change regularly; yet many problems persist no matter what skills each generation of leaders brings. Problem patterns often transcend generations and persist despite the personality and the skills of the leader in a system.

2. Though the traditional model can be predictive of human behavior in a generalized way across many situations and many populations, it is amazingly unreliable in specific situations. Marriage counselors are consistently wrong about which couples will be successful and which will not. Psychologists are unable to predict when a patient is going to “explode” and become violent. As professionals, we are consistently surprised in specific situations.

3. The traditional model focuses on the differences between cultures, genders, age groups and socio-economic groups. Research resulting in a plethora of details has reinforced this focus. A “slot machine” approach to these

categories is used to generate most research projects and doctoral dissertations, making such titles possible as the “Impact of Gender, Refugee Experience, Acculturation and Racism on Vietnamese Men.” Mountains of data are being accumulated as to how we are different. However, we are increasingly finding that we are more the same than we are different. Statistically, there is a wider range of diversity within each gender than there is between them. (The human genome project is tracing everyone’s ancestors back to Africa. Even across species it has been shown that humans share at least 95% of our DNA with chimpanzees.) Looking through the cultural “camouflage,” human behavior is remarkably similar across culture and across time.

4. A final aspect of the traditional model contributing to its inadequacy is the unending string of leadership trends and techniques that promise results. We each have shelves full of notebooks containing the latest and greatest leadership strategies that promised to change the world. Indeed the “half life” of such theories is as short as the publishing cycle and the time it takes to tour the country.

If the model we have works so well, what is it we keep looking for in all these theories? We all want to grow as persons, professionals and as leaders. It makes sense to investigate new things, but do these programs really bring lasting change to businesses and organizations? A dark by-product of this practice is what each “failure” does to us as leaders. When a technique doesn’t work for us we graciously assume that the problem is not the model we are given but our own inadequate execution or enthusiasm for the leadership approach “de jour.”

What is the usefulness of a model that does not account for pervasive problems that span generations, cannot reliably predict outcomes in any given situation, focuses on minutia that is increasingly less relevant and will morph into a new form that will soon collect dust on our shelves?

A New Model Emerging - Challenging New Research

Given these limitations of the traditional model, what are we to do? Perhaps we can take a hard look at what categories are truly meaningful within the model

and use them to construct a more useful one.

I believe that we are on the verge of a revolution in understanding human behavior. A number of areas of scientific research appear to be converging in a way that can positively impact our understanding of the leadership process and change the nature of leadership itself.

One area of great potential is brain research. With the advent of PET scans, we have a new understanding of brain functioning. Cognition has traditionally been understood as a rational process. Neurology has been understood from the metaphor of electricity and electrical wiring. We now know that our neurology is not mechanical but chemical with neurotransmitters acting in perfect concert from head to toe.

In addition to advances in brain studies, evolutionary research shows us that our brain is not a new creation specific to our species but rather an accumulation of millions of years of change spanning many species. Evolution has not re-designed the brain with each new species. What we know as the “human brain” is really an accumulation of many

brains with many of their qualities remaining intact. We not only have a cerebral cortex, but we have a region of our brain that we share with other mammals. What's more, we have a primitive region of our brain, the amygdala, (or limbic brain), that we share with reptiles. Evolution has left these "other two brains" largely intact over hundreds of millions of years. We know that under stress, activity in the limbic brain becomes heightened and activity in the cerebral cortex becomes suppressed. This means that people who are chronically anxious are not likely to behave in a rational manner. Powerful, time-worn patterns outside of cognition (or rather, pre-dating rational thought) are being discovered as profoundly influencing our behavior. Understanding these dynamics can be useful in predicting human behavior.

Another example of new insights through research can be found in systems theory. We now understand both the human body and human families and organizations as living systems interacting in a complex way. In particular, Family Systems Theory has shed light on the interaction and behavior of individuals in a group. We

now know that a group of people (like our physical body) seeks a kind of "status quo" that by nature is resistant to change. Normalizing and expecting this resistance can be useful in understanding human motivations and behavior.

Indeed, a new and useful model is emerging, one that is deeply informed by observations in brain functioning, biochemistry, evolution, and living systems.

Emotional Process Leadership Model

The examples above represent a small sample of what is being discovered as relevant to leadership. Viewed side by side with the limitations of the traditional model, one truth stands out. Human behavior is profoundly influenced by non-rational processes that must be recognized if we are to truly understand not only ourselves but the challenges of leading others. Indeed, Friedman observes, "that leadership is essentially an emotional process rather than a cognitive phenomenon" (Failure of Nerve, p. 13).

Building on this work, we at HealingLeaders have developed what we call the "Emotional Process Leadership Model." (EPLM) When we use the word

“emotional” to describe these processes, we are referring not to emotions or emotional intelligence. We are referring to non-rational, pre-cognitive and systemic processes that override rational thinking when people are under stress. The Emotional Process Leadership Model offers a unique and useful perspective that allows the leader to have greater choices about how to “be” as a person and how to “be with” others in a leadership situation.

Elements of the Emotional Process Leadership Model

By way of introducing the EPLM, I want to emphasize three aspects I see as essential if a person is to make use of this model:

1. Awareness – Understanding the leadership process as essentially an emotional process and maintaining that awareness can save the leader from a lot of dead ends. You cannot reason with someone whose creative thinking has shut down and who’s “flight or fight” thinking has been activated. (Some research from couple’s therapy indicates that this takes place in men when their heart rates reach 100-105 bpm.) With this awareness, the EPLM frees us from

the “tyranny of technique” which falsely promises success if only the right approach is taken. Awareness of the direction and flow of anxiety in our relationships is crucial to helping us position ourselves as “step down transformers” of this anxiety and inviting the presence of rational thinking and creative problem solving.

2. Self-management – If we are aware that leadership is a non-rational process, we can learn to recognize these elements in ourselves. Recognizing these processes in ourselves gives us the option of managing them. If we know that our own creativity and problem-solving skills are “shut down” in response to a stressful event, we can take responsibility for ourselves and do what we need to do to recover the brain functioning behind those skills. Addressing our own anxiety and remaining non-anxious with others has the potential alone to transform the leadership process for us. The EPLM therefore offers a powerful mode of being and of transforming both the leader and the leadership context. Maturity (the ability to self-regulate) is every bit as contagious as anxiety.

3. Self-definition – It is said that there are two great questions in life. The first is, “Where am I going?” The second is, “Who will go with me?” (Heaven help us if we get them in the wrong order!) One of the things that occurs in stressful and chaotic situations is the diminishment of individuality (and therefore creativity) and the imposition of a “herd” mentality. Like a body with cancer, organizations in crisis forget “who they are” and become vulnerable to invasive forces that want to “fuse and use” the host for their own uncontrolled and chaotic agendas. Like a healthy immune system, a leader who will define himself/herself can build a healthy resilience in the organization that will leave it less vulnerable to such forces. We know the human immune system learns and builds immunity in response to a “survivable challenge.” Instead of adapting to the most anxious and most chaotic individuals around us, we can make other choices. We can offer a useful challenge to others by stating clearly who we are and where we are going. People around us will then be able to decide if they are going with us on our leadership journey or not. This brings the focus of the EPLM to that of

the leader instead of the follower. It involves the most difficult task of all authentic relationships - remaining ourselves while staying connected to others.

What the Emotional Process Leadership Model is NOT

Having defined our unique approach to leadership, I am compelled now to continue by clarifying briefly what the Emotional Process Model is not.

- It is not about emotional intelligence but rather awareness of non-rational processes.
- It is not a new strategy or technique but a qualitative shift in a way of being and “being with” others.
- It is not a “quick fix” that can be used to manipulate others but a life-long discipline with benefits over time.
- It is not something that can be taught so much as “caught.” (That’s why Howard and I started HealingLeaders – to allow others to learn to use this model to increase their effectiveness in their own specific contexts.)

Conclusion

The emotional (non-rational) processes that profoundly influence both leaders

and groups are constantly operating in the background of any situation. Like water for a fish, they define the very fabric of each situation. They are present and powerful whether we are aware of them or not. It is not only my profound hope but also my firm belief that this new perspective has the power to

profoundly transform leaders and the organizations which they lead. Thus the adventure of leadership continues!

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