

THE ROOT OF LEADERSHIP AFFLICTION: HOW EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS HANDLE EMOTIONS

In our ongoing discussion on exceptional leadership, we are taking a close look at leaders' emotions in the workplace.

In our last blog, we discussed leaders with emotional immaturity, and the contrast of leaders who lead with emotional resilience. Today, we will continue that discussion by discussing four important "R's" in leaders' emotions:

EMOTIONAL REALISM **EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY** **EMOTIONAL RESONANCE & RESPONSIVENESS**

EMOTIONAL REALISM.

Emotionally mature people take a humble, sober and realistic stance toward the world, embracing the world as it really is, not as they wish it to be. They are capable of self-insight, emotional candor and honesty—beginning with how they view themselves. They are what we call "grounded" and "in touch." In stark contrast, Johnson manifested a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, and with it, a profoundly skewed perception of his abilities and accomplishments. He routinely over estimated his abilities, inflated his accomplishments and devalued the contribution of others. Those closest to Johnson observed that he was incapable of critical reflection and closed off to anything that challenged his need-fulfilling belief in his infallible judgment.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Emotionally mature individuals own their attitudes and actions, thereby taking full responsibility for one's life, including the consequences of one's attitudes and behavior. They own what they feel and what they do. The buck stops with them in terms of their response to life, with all its adversity and relational challenges. Johnson was an Olympic level blamer. He lived in a world filled with enemies, mostly imagined or of his own making, all of which threatened his carefully spun myth of grandiosity, and gave him a ready excuse for why his plans or policies were not working. He demanded all of the glory and took none of the blame. He responded to criticism not by evaluating his behavior or policies, but by becoming defensive and blaming enemies or incompetent subordinates.

EMOTIONAL RESONANCE AND RESPONSIVENESS.

Emotionally mature people have the capacity to connect with others, identify with their situation, and then speak and interact with them in a manner appropriate to their situation and need. They use this information to help, serve and otherwise relate in constructive ways with others. Johnson was a curious combination of hyper-empathy and low emotional resonance. His insensitivity, in the words of Time Magazine columnist Hugh Sidey, “was one of those minor tragedies in the make-up of Lyndon B. Johnson... He just does not become engaged with the people he meets. He does not respond to their overtures, does not pick up opportunities to endear himself...His mind is on Johnson...”

And yet, Johnson was unrivaled in his capacity to “read people” and use this knowledge to serve his interests. He possessed a natural ability, an untutored genius to do a quick study of a person and discern the contours of his or her emotional life, the individual’s hopes and fears, a kind of sixth sense about what made people tick. As Caro observed, Johnson... “read with a novelist’s sensitivity, with an insight that was unerring, with an ability, shocking in the depth of its penetration and perception, to look into a man’s heart and know his innermost worries and desires.” Of course, he was primarily interested in the person’s emotional life in order to exploit their vulnerabilities to serve his own interests.

We are all susceptible to the same dark emotional undercurrents and fueled by the same needs that shaped Lyndon Johnson.

However, the “garden variety” of emotional immaturity—losing one’s temper now and then, the propensity to blame others for our own inadequate performance, or hiding one’s weaknesses—pales in comparison to Johnson’s affliction and his track record in afflicting others. While Johnson is, admittedly, an extreme example, his behavior highlights what happens when those afflicted with emotional immaturity meet up with the power and privileges afforded by a top leadership position.

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www.Lead2Transform/Education
info@lead2transform.com