

University of Massachusetts Amherst

**FAMILY BUSINESS CENTER****Emotional Intelligence - Stop Amygdala Hijackings***by Shel Horowitz*

"The human brain hasn't had a hardware upgrade in about 100,000 years." According to world-renowned emotional intelligence expert (and area resident) Daniel Goleman, most of us are still acting out of the ancient **fight-or-flight** response, and that upgrade is long-overdue.

Goleman battled illness to bring this message to FBC's December gathering at the Clarion. "Emotions make us pay attention right now-- this is urgent - and give us an immediate action plan without having to think twice. The emotional component evolved very early: Do I eat it, or does it eat me - you don't sit around and Google it." and that emotional response "can take over the rest of the brain in a millisecond if threatened.

Today the threat is symbolic ('he's not treating me fair') but we respond with the same biological response."

Goleman calls this eruption an "amygdala hijack." **The amygdala is the center of the brain that controls this response, and also controls empathy; when it feels threatened, it can respond not just irrationally, but destructively.** "When Mike Tyson bit Evander Holyfield's ear, it was a very bad business decision - it cost him \$3 million. It was an amygdala hijack."

Here are three signs of an amygdala hijack: **strong emotional reaction, sudden onset, and "when you reflect later, you realize it was inappropriate".**

**The opposite of an amygdala hijack is emotional intelligence:** "the integration of the emotional center and the executive center. Interestingly, boredom also correlates poorly with emotional intelligence. "When your amygdala is hijacked, or when you're bored, your performance is very poor, despite your abilities." The emotionally intelligent person is engaged, focused, motivated and attentive, and matches these skills to the situation.

And one of the hallmarks of an emotionally intelligent leader is the ability to reshape the emotional landscape of a potentially troublesome situation. "When you realize that emotions are contagious, you understand a primal task of a leader. Your spleen, your lymphatic system couldn't care less about the spleen or lymphatic system of the other person- but emotions are designed to be in tune." Thus, **humor and empathy are traits that can de-escalate conflict and help move toward a working consensus of how to handle the problem** - while emotionally unintelligent behavior such as visible anger creates contagion of unpleasant emotions, and makes it tough to get anything resolved. "Observing videos of the best leaders, they got people to laugh three times more often. It's a brain to brain link."

Goleman studied core competencies at 500 organizations, and found that emotional intelligence - interacting with people in a way that makes them feel valued, and thus leads them to value their interactions with you- is twice as important in all jobs at distinguishing the best from the average. For top leaders, "emotional intelligence is 80-90% of the distinguishing competencies. The higher you go, the more it matters." Too often, however, family businesses run on the Peter Principle of promoting people until they've gone past their ability to be effective. They got promoted because of their technical competence, but now that they have people reporting to them, they can't make the transition. The lesson for family businesses, of course, is to hire and promote people who display substantial emotional intelligence - and this can have a major positive impact on your business. "In a study of 4000 leaders and their direct reports, the style of leadership is the biggest driver of climate - 70%. And climate affects 20-30% of business results."

It starts very early. Goleman cited the "marshmallow test," which measures the emotional intelligence skill of self-management: Four-year-olds were told, "'You can have this marshmallow now if you want, but if you wait until I come back from my errand, you'll have two.' About 1/3 can't stand it and grab the marshmallow, another third wait the full 7 or 8 minutes. 14 years later, they're tracked down by a professor at Smith, Phil Peake. The kids who grabbed fell apart under pressure, they couldn't get along with friends. The kids who waited had a 210-point advantage on their SAT's. The people in Princeton who make up the SAT were stunned, they said it's the difference between a family with no college education and a parent with a master's degree."

Unfortunately, Goleman sees today's patterns of child rearing as problematic. "Children are unintended victims of ratcheting up of competition. Their parents have to work longer and harder to maintain their parents' standard of living. Kids are over-scheduled after school, you don't have the down time. And there's a technological experiment with the world's youth. They spend more time alone, staring at a monitor than has been true ever in human history. There is relational poverty. They have less time with the people in their family. Fewer parents have the luxury of someone in the family to hang out with their kids. You don't have time as a child with the adults who care the most about you and who can help you learn these lessons, and nor is there time for free play, where you work problems out yourself. **Childhood has been impoverished in that regard, particularly in affluent families.** It's imperative that we put this in schools, so that at some point every day, you're getting it. In the interest of society, we need to institute social emotional learning programs."

100 Venture Way, Hadley, MA 01035 ([directions \(http://www.umasslearn.net/about/directions/\)](http://www.umasslearn.net/about/directions/)) • [bryck@contined.umass.edu](mailto:bryck@contined.umass.edu) (<mailto:bryck@contined.umass.edu>) • (413) 545-4545

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