



The Language of Emotion

Colin Hatfield, Founder of Visible Leaders, tells Mary-Anne Baldwin how mastering your emotions is key to good communication

Colin Hatfield, Founder of Visible Leaders, the communications specialist, wants senior executives to think more about their leadership style.

Knowing strengths, blind spots and how to respond to situations is hugely beneficial. "It shows people that you

know yourself, but more importantly it demonstrates that you don't necessarily have all the answers. A bit of vulnerability goes a long way in leadership," says Colin.

"Business is 80 per cent rational and 20 per cent emotional," he adds. "You need to have a rational case, but people

must know how you feel about that rational case."

Too much of either your head or your heart can be unhelpful. Colin says: "From experience, we've found that practising can help you get a feel for how to bring those two things together >



in a meaningful way; so when a real situation comes along, you're far better equipped to deal with it successfully."

For example, Colin shares an observation of a leader he works with. "With me, he comes across as super accessible, a good listener, curious, interested. Then I asked to see him in action. The way he ran one meeting was completely different to the person I knew. He was dominating and wanted to hog the airwaves, largely due to his enthusiasm for the subject. It meant everyone just sat there listening or commenting on what he was saying, rather than speaking up with their own thoughts and ideas as intended," he explains.

Put Emotion in Your Message

While it's important to check in with yourself, you must also do the same with those around you. "A socially skilful leader will understand people; curiosity and listening are big parts of that. It's also about being flexible in your approach, because how you instil confidence in one person won't be the same as how you do it with another," says Colin.

Likewise, it's just as important to read a boardroom as it is the entire company. A good leader will be able to assess a situation and their audience, and know how to respond to both. "This requires self-awareness but also an understanding of others," Colin comments.

"Every leader has to build a relationship with the stakeholders they want to influence and social skills lie at the heart of that. If you're going to be inspirational and motivational you must have that connection with people. Every

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interaction is an opportunity to build that relationship," he adds.

Strategy is at the heart of a company's operations but to communicate it you must also determine what's at the heart of its people. "Often there's nothing wrong with the actual message, it's just that you're not showing any empathy for your audience," says Colin. "More often than not, it's about demonstrating that you know what life is like on the other side of the table... You're never going to connect with people through rational case-making alone."

Colin uses the example of one leader who was planning a speech when closing a UK facility. He wanted to reason with his audience about why UK production wasn't cost effective by explaining, blow-by-blow, the cost differentials between electronics manufacture in the UK versus different parts of Europe.

"Fortunately, in the run-up to the speech, it became apparent that the best he could do for that audience was to feel their pain. Only then could he explain the rationale for the decision," says Colin.

Yet leaders can also be too emotionally invested and must adapt to each

situation. "There are times when it's absolutely right to be cool-headed and perhaps even cold-hearted," says Colin.

He witnessed one CEO burst into a meeting room during an M&A discussion so visibly loaded with emotion it broke the trust of fellow leaders. "The rest of the people in the room were left wondering if the CEO was really the best person to be in charge of those difficult and delicate negotiations," he explains.

Although it's important to show emotion as a leader, you should master it and channel it as a tool. Doing so will make you more valuable to the company as employers are increasingly calling for it.

"I think business is waking up to the benefit of having leaders with more emotional awareness," says Colin. "It adds a vital dimension to leadership at no real cost." ■



Colin Hatfield
Founder
Visible Leaders

Colin and his colleagues at Visible Leaders assist those in senior management by developing diverse approaches to communication, building compelling narratives to enhance reputation and momentum.

He previously oversaw a global team at Bell Pottinger before leaving to join The Leadership Agency in 2006.

Colin also co-founded In Real Life, one of the first creative agencies to specialise in brand experiences.

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