

Emotions Are Data, Too

by [Gianpiero Petriglieri](#)

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Hardly a day goes by that I don't meet it, the struggle with emotions at work.

The misunderstood colleague, filled with frustration, attempting not to show it; the executive wondering how to confront her team's lack of enthusiasm; the student hesitating to confess his affection to a classmate.

It has been two decades since emotional intelligence became a cornerstone of managers' self-improvement projects. Meditation has broken into the C-suite. Alpha males and females extol the virtues of mindfulness. And still we remain unsure about what to do with emotions at work.

One moment we do not have enough emotion, the next we have too much. We want work to ignite our passion but we don't want our passions to affect our judgment. We want cool heads and warm hearts—as long as they remain apart.

The pursuit of passionate equanimity in the office might look like a valid remedy for the consuming pace of business in our day and age. I'd like to argue, however, that it might be a symptom as well—of a work culture that views emotions in ways that keep us struggling with them in the long run.

We have come to regard emotions as *assets*—precious or toxic as they may be—rather than as *data*. Therefore we focus on *managing* them, which often means trying to exploit, diffuse, or sanitize them, far more than staying with them long enough to discern their *meaning*. And when we do the latter, we usually interpret them as revealing something about their owners alone.

Treating emotions this way, as spillovers of our inner worlds, leaves us with acute, even obsessive awareness of them—and yet limited insight.

Not because we're neglectful of our emotions, incompetent at managing them, or simply, hopelessly human. Not because emotions are neither always conscious nor easily named. Not just, at least.

It is because our emotions at work are more than echoes of our history, expressions of our virtues and neuroses, or shadows of our longings. While those always play a part, emotions are seldom ours alone.

What you and I feel at work has as much to do with what we are doing, and what others expect of people in our roles—and of someone who looks like us—as it does with our own inner lives.

We readily accept that work shapes how we act and how we see ourselves, that others' expectations subtly corner us. We rarely think the same may be true of our emotions — even private ones — as well.

But if we *play* a part at work, more or less willingly, a part more or less fitting with the person we believe we are, why should we not *feel* that part as well?

What if emotions were another element in our role's unwritten script, which our history merely prepares us for and our aspirations only make us more willing to perform? What if the assumption that emotions are ours—alone—to mind and tame made us more likely to torment ourselves than to question how that script casts us and who its authors and intended audience are?

Take an energetic executive who was wondering if he had become depressed when I met him, shortly after a big promotion. He had been asked to turn a division around, and had relished the challenge at first.

Months later, however, his reviled predecessor was thriving in another company while he himself was deeply dispirited. Despite his good progress, he could not exercise a lingering fear of failure with the usual enthusiasm and determination, and worried that it might be catching up with him.

Reflective as he was, he could easily link his fear and shame to certain disappointments of his youth. What he found harder was to see that his feelings also spoke of something broader than his unresolved sense of inadequacy. They reflected the status of his division, whose problems were blamed for everything that threatened the company's viability in the marketplace.

His well-disguised fears and old sensitivities made him a perfect match for the position, psychologically speaking. They made him more likely to carry the sense of inadequacy on behalf of other executives, who could thus feel blameless for the company's difficulties, than to challenge the arrangements that evoked it.

Taking a more systemic (and less conformist) view of emotions, as sources of intelligence about the work and culture of our organizations, does not make us any less responsible for them. Quite the contrary, it calls for us to use the insight we gain for more than improving our effectiveness or achieving peace of mind.

How would we go about extracting systemic insight from our emotion? Here are three questions to get us started.

How do we show (which) emotions?

Stop asking whether you show enough emotions. Ask how you show them. We are always expressing emotions, even if we are not talking about them. Particularly when we are not talking about them. There are no emotions we express more than those we are trying to hide, especially from ourselves.

(It's when we believe that we have no emotions that emotions can most easily have us.)

It is not always unpleasant emotions that we deny—or hide in plain sight. I know workplaces where aggression is acceptable while needs for comfort and recognition make people uncomfortable. So fighting, for all it is bemoaned, becomes a safer form of intimacy—a way to connect and show that one cares.

Silencing emotions breeds mistrust and loneliness. Acting them out without talking about them safeguards the status quo. Silence makes it harder to recognize, make sense of, and challenge the division of emotional labor, so to speak, that keeps us feeling the same way over and over again.

Who gets to feel what?

Emotions are seldom distributed equally. They are often bundled with certain roles.

Consider hope and despair, confidence and concern, pride and shame, poise and agitation, vocal outrage and silent contempt. The former in each pair is usually assigned to, and expected of, people in powerful and visible roles. The latter is consigned to those in less powerful and visible ones, to nurse on behalf of those who must avoid them.

“Be yourself” and “get a grip” are common ways we are nudged into those places, as both often translate into, “Feel and show more of what I expect you to.”

This runs counter to the common belief that our emotions are what funnel us into different roles, and that by managing those emotions we make ourselves more suitable for certain assignments. In fact, our roles often elicit our emotions. And we don’t often realize that until, when we move on from one role to the next, the emotions we felt dissipate, only to capture our successors.

Needless to say, such divisions of labor, never explicit but respected by most, do not bode well for problem solving, mutual understanding, and collaboration.

What is the purpose of these emotions (and who benefits from them)?

Assume that which emotions are silenced and which are voiced, and who gets to feel and express what, is neither random nor affected by our character alone.

The heartless CEO, the guilty working mom, the ambitious middle manager, the frazzled assistant. Consider them assignments, albeit unconscious ones.

Then you have a lens to examine what purpose, and whose interests, those assignments may serve—what they enable, what they avert, who they protect—and what everyone, including you, gets out of them.

It may be safety, righteousness, approval, achievement, or relief. It may be the illusion that everyone gets what they deserve rather than what they can afford.

It may be the familiarity, if not comfort, of experiencing what we are used to—within and around us. A sense of knowing our place and what it feels like.

Interpreted that way—tied to ourselves in a role, in context, doing work—emotions can help us learn about and manage more than just ourselves. They give us hints about what keeps us in our place, how we may change places, and even what it might take to change the whole place.

When you find yourself thinking, “Here I go again,” because you sense that you are getting caught up in a familiar pattern, ask where in your past that pattern comes from, what it says about you, and how you may ease its grip. But don’t stop there. That’s only half the work. Ask also what evoked those emotions here, in these circumstances, now.

Unless we use our self-awareness to examine the system more dispassionately, reflection is just another form of withdrawal. Unless we turn our hard-earned equanimity into resolve to change our surroundings as much as ourselves, the struggle with emotions never ends. Any practice to manage them becomes at best a coping mechanism—at worst an instrument of the status quo.

We can’t be saner, or at least freer, until we stop sanitizing emotions. We can’t make workplaces fairer if we lock people into managing them alone.

Yes, emotions are personal. They are just not all about us.

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It's the "Ambiguity" that sometimes goes along with the "Emotions" that's tough....especially in corporate America. "Emotions" when geared towards positivity and productivity that's a good thing...but when their masked through an ambiguity lense then life gets pretty tough.

Thanks for the great post!

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