

DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK?

"If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop diggin'."

Will Rogers

"I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor."

Henry David Thoreau

Have you ever found yourself feeling great, like everything was going just the way you wanted, and then you get a piece of news or have an interaction that takes you by surprise? On the turn of a dime, you find yourself overtaken with anger, frustration, or fear and completely unable to think a rational thought.

If you're lucky, you may be alone and have time to process what happened. But often, you may be with others and find yourself blurting or barking out something inappropriate that you immediately regret.

If you're human, you've had your share of these moments. In the emotional intelligence literature, these sudden emotional tornados that take us by surprise are known as *amygdala hijackings*.

The amygdala is the oldest part of the brain that matches incoming sensory input with emotional memories, scanning for danger or threat. If there's a match, the amygdala sends a signal to your nervous system, before the rational mind, the neocortex, can tell you, or even question whether this perceived threat is real or not. Almost instantaneously, you are thrust into a fight or flight response.

But you may be thinking – okay, so maybe I do embarrass myself at times, but does it really matter? The answer is emphatically YES!

Emotional self-regulation has been demonstrated to be a critical skill in resilience, another major factor in whether people are successful. Andrew Shatte and Karen Reivich, authors of "The Resilience Factor", state that "self-regulation is important for forming intimate relationships, succeeding at work, and maintaining physical health."

A study of 130 executives found that how well people handled their own emotions determined how much people around them preferred to deal with them. Not only is dealing with people who are angry, sullen, or anxious a drain, but negativity can also be contagious, thus affecting the performance of more than one person.

How do you avoid an amygdala hijacking? By developing emotional intelligence skills – particularly in the area of self-management. In the last issue, I stated that Self-Awareness is the linchpin for competence in all the other areas of Emotional Intelligence. The research validates that with self-awareness, a person has a 50-50 chance of demonstrating Self-Management, but without Self-Awareness, a person has virtually no chance of demonstrating Self-Management.

Self-Management is made up of self-regulation abilities, the absence of which, hold us back, and motivation abilities that push us forward. Of these abilities, emotional self-control is the core, critical ability in self-management and is the cornerstone of self-regulation.

If you know that you struggle with emotional self-regulation, take a hard look at the following behaviors and see if you are able to consistently demonstrate them:

- Do I show restraint or do I act impulsively?
- Do I have patience or do I show frustration?
- Do I behave calmly in stressful situations?
- Am I able to stay composed and positive, even in trying times?

In order to get a better handle on managing your emotions, here are some questions you can explore to increase your self-awareness about what you feel and believe about emotions:

1. Are you aware of what you are feeling moment to moment?
2. What are your beliefs about emotion?
3. What emotions were okay to have and to express in your family and which were not?
4. What cultural and gender-based messages have influenced your emotional expression and how you perceive others?
5. Are you aware of the emotion looming on the horizon, or does it go unnoticed on your radar?
6. Do you avoid addressing the emotion because of personal discomfort?
7. Do you ignore the emotional energy because you are unsure whether or how to address it?

The next step is to become aware of what triggers an amygdala hijacking for you. Some of these you may not be able to prepare for, such as unexpected bad news, but others you can tackle preventively and work with yourself, a friend, or a coach to become more skillful in creating strategies that will allow you to remain calm and composed.

Some common triggers are:

- Fatigue or other kinds of physical stressors
- Strong emotion in yourself or in others this can be particularly stressful for those who prefer to look at things objectively through logical analysis
- Allowing a build-up of emotion and negative feeling over time because of personal discomfort with emotions and/or conflict
- A tendency to take things personally
- A sense of time urgency and/or being over-committed

Start paying attention to how you manage your emotions. As with anything, practice makes better! Effective self-management provides a wonderful sense of personal well-being and enhances your leadership attractiveness quotient!