Lessons From A Leaking Radiator

I sent my faithful 4-wheeler into the workshop recently for its regular maintenance service. Little did I realize that there were potential problems waiting to happen! Isn't it the same for some of us – getting into the office and not knowing what lies ahead of us, most of the time? We think it's going to be a great day and then, a stressful spanner gets thrown at us!

The workshop service advisor called an hour later giving me the bad news – my car radiator casing had cracked and it was leaking at the top. And my car shock absorbers were leaking and they needed to be changed too! We chatted about how much it was going to cost and typical of the analytical me, I decided to get a second opinion and compare quotes. So I collected my trusty vehicle and went to another of my regular but much smaller workshop. The price was not going to be very different so I decided to take my car back to the first workshop early in the morning.

The ride from my home to the workshop was going to take me about 20 minutes with minimum traffic since it's the school holidays and people have begun clearing their usual year-end annual leave entitlement. My eyes were on the temperature gauge the moment I started my drive. 10 minutes later, the temperature indicator was almost at the halfway range – no problem I thought since that's usually where it's at! Just like where our emotional levels are, most of the time!

How we feel emotionally has a direct correlation with how we would behave, physically and physiologically. Not long after that – probably just moments – the temperature indicator began moving upwards little by little, but within a very short span of time and distance. I could literally feel my heart beginning to pump faster, my hands beginning to grip the steering wheel tighter, and little thoughts of the unimaginable started creeping in. I stopped concentrating on the phone conversation with my wife (I hope she won't read this!).

Each minute passed so slowly and somehow, the short distance to the workshop seemed further than it usually is. As I watched the temperature needle move, it was like nothing else mattered. The work that I had yet to do in the office didn't seem that important then, pressing clients deadlines that I was thinking about earlier suddenly disappeared, and I even stopped thinking about the Christmas holidays with family and friends! There were a couple of moments when the indicator moved back downwards and when each time it happened, my emotions also seemed to abate as if in equal proportion. It was almost like seeing my own emotional temperature indicator on the dashboard of my car!

The last 5 minutes to the workshop, I was almost numb to what was happening around me. My eyes were fixated on the temperature indicator as it touched the "H" (High). My thoughts at that moment were on turbo-mode "Should I pull over? But I'm just around the corner! Will the car jam to a stop? No, please God, let me get to the workshop, just a little more! Is there going to be smoke? What else should I be looking out for? Will my car catch fire? Should I stop now?

The closer I get the easier it'll be for the workshop guys to get to me if my car breaks down …" Then, the overheating sign came on just about 2 minutes before I can reach my workshop. It was as if time froze! Everything was moving in such slow motion, as if I was watching the playback mode of a scene in one of the movies. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, and my emotions have swung from high anxiety to desperate hope and fear!

Isn't that experience similar for us most of the time when we are under stress? Our emotions rise in its intensity from low to high quintiles, and if not interrupted, will cause us to blow an emotional fuse and in my case, my car's gasket too! So instead of just replacing my car radiator, the thermostat and shock absorbers, I had to pay for a new gasket!

If we are able to see people around us with an imaginary temperature indicator next to their hearts all the time, we will become more effective at leading people, influencing customers, and building trust or rapport. Essentially, we will become much more effective at practicing empathy, an invaluable emotional intelligence skill. When we "see" (feel) an individual's imaginary temperature (emotional) indicator needle rises, what can we do to help bring it down? Likewise, when the emotional indicator needle begins descending, what should we do and what can we say, to help elevate it especially if the need is to increase his/her excitement or enthusiasm about an idea or product/service of ours.

Similar to my car's temperature indicator, people's emotional levels don't just hop from "L" to "H". As such, we need to become more discerning and sensitive to how those around us are feeling all the time and if needed, ask them periodically "Why do I sense that you are a little uncomfortable with what I'm saying?" or "Are you okay with what I'm suggesting?"

In most instances, it is better to pre-empt any fuses from blowing – I should have stopped my car before it hit "H" no matter how close I was to the workshop. It will take a lot more effort, time and sometimes, money or tears to fix the problem when it blows!

For some of us, we work so hard and we push ourselves, and then some more. And before we realize it, we are running on empty like a leaking radiator, experiencing symptoms of emotional and physical fatigue. We need to become more aware of our inner being. Take a break! Reflect and rejuvenate. Sharpen our axe before we resume. Sometimes, we just need to take one step back to move another two steps forward.

Emotional regulation is probably one of the most important elements in today's high stress environment. Emotions drive people, and people drive performance.

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