

Developing Leaders

Quarterly

MAKING ORGANIZATIONS MORE HUMAN

The Curious Organization



**Cutting-edge thinking to catalyze
your leadership practice**

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Contents

Editor's letter <i>Roddy Millar</i>	2
Building a Curious Organization <i>Roland Deiser interviews Simon Brown</i>	7
Curiosity: A Leadership Trait for Dynamic Times <i>Stefaan van Hooydonk</i>	23
Igniting an Ecosystem of Curiosity <i>Saar Ben-Attar with Mxolisi Mgojo</i>	37
Human Capital Accounting <i>Bay Jordan</i>	49
The Social CEO <i>Henrik Cronqvist and Désirée-Jessica Pély</i>	65
The Trouble with Executive Development <i>Wendy Shepherd</i>	78
Collective Leadership <i>Katleen De Stobbeleir</i>	93
Winning Businesses Must Tackle Politics <i>Donna Kennedy-Glans and James M. Kerr</i>	104
Lifelong Learning and University-Based Business Schools <i>Daniel Chadwick</i>	121
Refining the Solution to an Emotional Muddle <i>Paul Brown</i>	133
Idea #634 Learning Power: Learners Must Take Control	145
Idea #396 How to Limit Ambiguity of Responsibility and Learn from Failure	151
Idea #656 Reading Group Emotions Is Key to Transformational Leadership	157
Book Review A New Way to Think	163
Book Review Curious Minds	166
Book Review Fortitude	169
Book Review Uncommon Accountability	172





By Paul Brown

Refining the Solution to an Emotional Muddle

One of the curious things about the 20th century is how much that century was dominated by psychology as a way of trying to make sense of human behaviour in all its manifest idiosyncrasies. Two decades on, some hindsight observations about psychology might be pertinent.

Psychology likes to define itself as ‘the science of human behaviour’ or ‘the science of the mind’. But a little thought about what a true science is might raise a question as to whether either of those claims is true.

Galileo risked burning at the stake for challenging the mediaeval church’s Aristotelian view that the earth was the centre of the universe; but even if he had to deny what he knew to be true in order to avoid the horrors of being burned to death, suffering a 15-year house imprisonment instead, he laid the foundations of a modern science that Isaac Newton especially built on. Following the ten-year English Civil War

that ended in 1651 and that resulted in nine years of the only period in English history of non-monarchical rule, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. There was then an extraordinary flowering of the arts, science and fashion; of which one manifestation was the founding of what is now known as The Royal Society – the oldest and pre-eminent scientific society in the world and in which being elected a Fellow is the highest mark of recognition among the worldwide scientific community.

But what is special about science? It is that there is agreement, backed by replicable experimental evidence, of what one is observing or talking about. In so far as facts can ever be true, science relies upon established experimental truths. In distinction, other bodies of knowledge – philosophy and theology especially from mediaeval times to this day – rely upon assertion and the individual's belief in their own rightness, but with no underlying proof. The modern social sciences suffer the same dilemma.

Twentieth century psychology fails the test of being a true science. Curiously psychologists across the Western world have never got together, at any stage of their knowledge, to agree fundamental concepts like: What do we mean by 'a person'? or what is 'the Self'? There is a vast literature on both subjects, but it is a contentious literature, not one founded on any starting agreements. And so different psychologists have different answers to such basic questions.

Imagine the chaos if different engineers chose to design bridges based solely on some attribute like design without reference to the inherent properties of metal in suspended arches. When an aeroplane falls out of the sky or a bridge collapses, immense resources are put into discovering why. When a politician fails through what used to be called charac-



What the 21st century brain sciences have shown us is that our thinking system is there to give us an account of what our brain already knows

and operational goals, organizationally, must rely on the way human energy has been applied – or mis-applied – within the organization.

There are many words used socially as well as organizationally as if they were commonly understood. The complex word ‘emotions’ is one, with its attendant concepts of ‘feelings’, ‘moods’ and ‘states’. No-one denies their existence, but what exactly are they? Psychology has certainly not agreed a working definition, but the modern brain-sciences are showing us how they work.

‘Emotions’ tend to get a bad press in organizations. But if one hyphenates the word as e-motion it is suddenly possible to see that embedded in it is the fact that energy produces action. Stated descriptively as $e=m^2$, a new formulation for organizational behaviour appears. The energy of the emotions underpins action and motivational focus.

The 17th century philosopher Descartes coined the phrase that translates as ‘I think, therefore I am’. As the precursor to the 18th century Enlightenment in the Western world it created a split between the ‘rational’ and the ‘irrational’; with a strong implication that the first was much preferable to the second because the second was emotional. 120 years of psychology has not re-integrated the two. In general, psychology consigned ‘the emotions’ to the darker side of human experience in a place difficult to access called ‘the unconscious’ which, when attached to the Freudian concepts of repressed sexual desires, made ‘the emotions’ a place to avoid unless explored in the privacy of the psychoanalytic couch.

But two changes have happened in this 21st century that create the opportunity for a new framework of understanding about the emotions. And if, as they do, they drive behaviour, then a more precise understanding of them is crucial for the post-Covid better development and re-think of the distributed interdependence that has been forced upon all organizations.

The first change is that Freud has been shown to be something of a fraud. In much of his writing, he described clinical material that fitted his theories but, it transpires, the clinical material was fabricated for the purposes of supporting his theories. In a page-turner of a book, *Freud: the making of an illusion*, author Frederick Crews describes the detective work he did on previously inaccessible archival material in divining what Freud was really up to.

The second change, and of huge significance, is now that the modern brain-sciences are showing us that we human beings are, like the rest of the physical world, essentially energy systems, and that what we have generally called our ‘psychology’ is the product of the way the brain has organized itself via the emotional system as experience, coupled to genetics

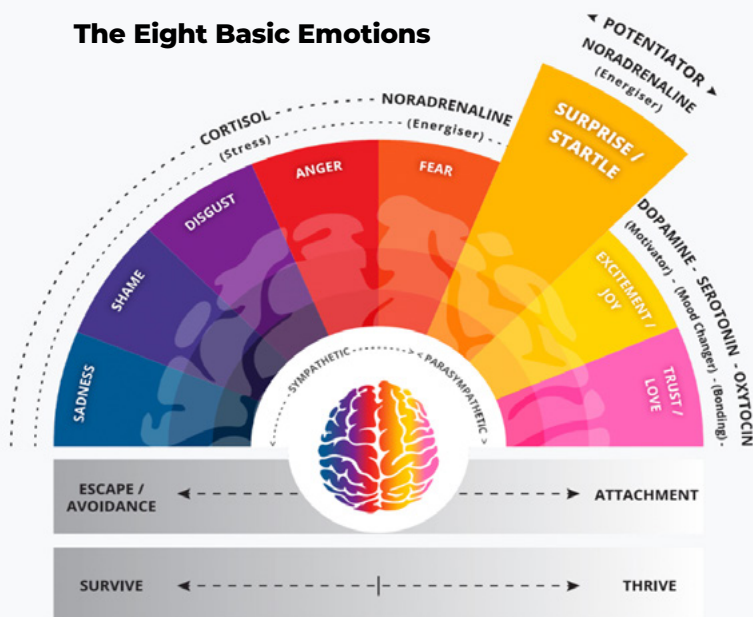
We do not think our way through life... we feel our way, and then give ourselves a cognitive account of that

coupled to neurochemistry. This makes each of us who we are, and the primary task of the brain is to both organize and manage that process. So, our individuality, character, personality, or – to wrap those up in one much-over-used 20th century word, our ‘psychology’, comes into being and is sustained via the emotional system. It is what makes each of us the unique individual that we each are.

We come into the world, day one, not only with the neurochemistry of our mother’s lived experiences having shaped our brains *in utero* whilst interacting with the designs of XX (female) or XY (male) chromosomes, but with the life-long potential for assimilating and recording and then enlarging and living off experience. That experience is encoded by the basic emotions in complex patterns within the 86 billion brain cells that we each possess. Attached eventually to language, that is the mechanism by which we create meaning. What the 21st century brain sciences have shown us is that our thinking system is there to give us an account of what our brain already knows, driven as it is by our own internal meaning-making derived from our own life experience. We do not think our way through life, even though we might think we do! We *feel* our way, and then give ourselves a cognitive account of that - which makes us think we are rational. The emotional system is not irrational, though. We now know it has its own rule base.

What an understanding of human behaviour lacks from the vantage point of the modern brain-sciences is a working model of the primary or basic emotions that gives thinkers about organizational behaviour a common starting point in studying or mobilizing ‘the emotions.’ In a wider context, it is of concern that, in research on the emotions, neuroscience labs around the world are in danger of adopting a variety of starting points based on various propositions emanating from social psychology about ‘the emotions’, creating what looks like scientific literature but proves to be one that defies comparative analysis because of the differing starting points.

The Eight Basic Emotions



‘Moods’ are difficult to understand and define, as they contain within them an energy that transmits to others for which there is as yet no adequate physical explanation.

A synthesis of a great deal of literature has produced the following proposal as a means of having a shared common starting point for what, in practice, is meant by ‘the emotions.’ It is believed to be the only attempt in the literature on the emotions to propose this shared common starting point and, in a single display, to specify the emotions on a continuum from escape/avoidance through to attachment; and to specify a survive – thrive dimension; and to link them at the same time to the basic neurochemicals and the commonly-understood behaviours arising from the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system reactions. It is a development of a proposal first put forward in 2018

In an artist’s palette, three primary colours are variously mixed to create the whole of the colour range used. All great paintings have the same basic materials but are all different. So, it is with us human beings. In response to the stimuli of experience the eight basic emotions combine to create the complexity of the feeling system that underpins all our behaviours, choices and decisions.

The emotional system also has the capacity to create moods and states. ‘Moods’ are difficult to understand and define, as they contain within them an energy that transmits to others for which there is as yet no adequate physical expla-



nation. Moods are palpable. The mood of a boss defines for many people the fundamental conditions of their working day's experience.

'States' are combinations of the emotions that imply inner awareness of experience without there being any specific, goal-directed behaviours resulting. 'Happiness', for example, is a state. States can be observed empathetically by others, but they do not have the same capacity to infect or hijack another's emotional system in the way that moods do. Whether or not, as the US Declaration of Independence would have it, the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right is of any particular value to a nation is open to question. It was perhaps best reformulated by the great Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, when he observed that:

There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way.

In summary, then, neuroscience lacks any agreed understanding of what 'the emotions' are, 20th century psychology having contentiously failed to establish any such agreement. But it is now clear, through the modern brain-sciences, that the emotional system both shapes and organizes the pathways of the developing brain and controls all subsequent behaviour. It

is proposed that the London Protocol of the Emotions synthesizes current knowledge in such a way that, if line managers and especially HR were to become fluent in its implications, it forms the basis for a widely understood starting point that lifts a working understanding of the emotions out of the shadows of knowledge into the light of understood organizational use.

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Reader Offer – Online Program on ‘Brain and Behaviour in Organizations’

If you are interested in furthering your understanding of how emotions impact organizational behaviour, Prof Brown, with Ideas for Leaders, has created an eight-module online program on **Brain and Behaviour in Organizations**. You can enrol for it at programs.ideasforleaders.com/p/brain-and-behaviour-in-organisations or by using the QR code below.

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