

# Emotional Rescue: A Conversation with Neal M. Ashkanasy

*Recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the study of emotions in organizations. However, research has been hampered by the ephemeral nature of emotions and the lack of an integrated, multilevel model for studying their role in organizational life. Neal M. Ashkanasy has tackled this problem by constructing a five-level model of emotions in organizations. Ashkanasy is a professor of management at the University of Queensland (Australia) Business School, where he is also director of research in the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Law. During 2004 he was a visiting professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. Before starting his academic career he spent eighteen years in the field of engineering. He has written or co-written articles published in such journals as the Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Executive, Journal of Management, and Journal of Organizational Behavior. He has coedited four books, including Managing Emotions in the Workplace (Sharpe, 2002). Ashkanasy recently visited and gave a colloquium at CCL in Greensboro, where he spoke with LiA managing editor Stephen Rush.*

**SR: Why is it important for organizations and individual leaders to be aware of and to understand the role of emotions in the workplace?**

**NA:** In the mid-1990s, people began to ask two questions—first of all, the question you just posed, and second, why had this issue been avoided for so



long? There was a theory that because emotions are so ephemeral, they vary from moment to moment and are intractable. The whole topic of emotions came to be seen as not rigorous. Serious researchers didn't do emotions—it was kid stuff. If you were going to do research that wasn't behavioral, forget about it; it was not considered serious. People have short memories, but fifteen or twenty years ago the cognitive researchers were struggling. People were saying: "Cognitive is just something you make up in your mind. The only things that count are the things you can see, what people do—behavior, behavior."

Gradually it came to be appreciated that human beings are more than just a set of mechanical behaviors. And now the next step has come, that because so much of human behavior is driven by the animal side of our

brains, the limbic system, you really can't understand behavior unless you understand the emotional side. So to me it's nonsense to study organizational behavior without appreciating that.

I have a saying that I tell my students: "The most irrational thought you can have is to think humans are rational." Here's an example: I have a student, Peter Noordink, who is studying the use of intuition by stock market traders. Peter sought my help in getting participants for his study, and I said: "You've already got some good results. Let's do a press release from the university, then a newspaper ad to generate publicity." But all press releases from the school must be vetted, and a prominent professor of finance objected to the subject matter of the study. He said: "We don't teach this in our school. This is not the way financial decision making takes place." And I replied: "Peter has done more than fifty interviews with financial traders. He's just reporting his results, which indicate quite clearly that these financial traders, some of whom make major decisions, rely on their intuition and are affected by their emotions." The professor kept insisting that he didn't think it was appropriate to be studying this. Peter and I managed to settle him down and convince him that it was scientific research. But he had this view that financial decision making could not involve emotions, that it's totally mechanical. And that is nonsense, absolute nonsense.

That's an example of why it's been so hard to get leaders and organ-

izations to appreciate the role of emotions and why it's so important that they do. And it's why in a few years someone like [Carnegie Mellon University professor of economics and psychology] George Loewenstein may win a Nobel Prize for his work on the role of emotions in economic behavior.

**SR: To facilitate your research into emotions, you have developed a model examining how emotions play out at five levels of an organization. Can you explain briefly what those levels are and some of your key findings?**

**NA:** Ultimately, emotions exist in the human brain, in the limbic system. And the limbic system is not static; it's dynamic, ongoing all the time. People experience a range of different positive and negative emotions as the day goes by. And not only that, but they actually exhibit a range of different behaviors, sometimes affected and sometimes not so affected behaviors, as the day goes by. Everything is built up from that point. So that lies at the basis of the model.

Once you aggregate an individual's preferences, behaviors, and styles, that gives you the second level, which is individual differences. The next question is, How do people relate to one another? That's the third level. How do people present themselves to one other? How do they perceive other people? At the junction of that level is emotional intelligence, how people perceive and deal with their own emotions and other people's emotions.

The level above that—well, once people are interactive with each other in a dyadic fashion—is, What happens when you put people together in groups? An additional set of dynamics comes into play; leadership starts to play a role. One phenomenon at this level is what could be called *emotional contagion*. Someone comes into a group displaying a particular emotional face, and in a remarkably

short period of time that person infects the other people in the group.

The next level is the culture and climate level. One interesting phenomenon at this level is the effect of climate in the area of succession. The climate in an organization can affect the way people are prepared to take risks in the organization in terms of placing themselves in positions for succession.

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I am proposing now that there are another two levels. The first is the industry level, because different industries have different emotional climates—the theme park industry and the funeral parlor industry, for instance. And the other level is national and regional differences—someone from a Latin background versus someone from a Germanic background, for instance.

**SR: The work of Daniel Goleman has been largely responsible for popularizing and sparking interest in emotional intelligence. But his concept of emotional intelligence is broader than the more technical and cautious definition that you work with—which was developed by psychologists John Mayer and Peter Salovey—that emotional**

**intelligence is the ability to perceive, assess, and influence one's own and other people's emotions. Are there any other areas where your and Goleman's ideas about emotional intelligence diverge?**

**NA:** In the literature you'll find the Goleman model and the model of [Reuven] Bar-On [who developed the Emotional Quotient Inventory, designed to measure a number of constructs related to emotional intelligence] called *mixed models*. They, particularly Bar-On, incorporated into the model of emotional intelligence quite large aspects of the personality. And I think that's one of the major areas of criticism of these models, that so much research has been done in personality but we have settled on the big five [sets of emotional competencies], for better or for worse, and the big five already include dimensions such as emotional stability and agreeableness. And people argue that even some of the other aspects, such as openness to experience, are also encapsulated in Goleman's measures.

The whole conceptualization of emotional intelligence is very, very vague and difficult to define. And it's interesting that it's the Goleman model of emotional intelligence, not the Mayer and Salovey model, that has been generating so much interest. Goleman, even though he has doctoral training in industrial and organizational psychology, is a journalist. He's trained as a journalist, he thinks like a journalist, and he writes like a journalist—and he's been very effective in that regard. But I think that we need to be very careful—he's not a scientist; he's a journalist. He's popularizing some ideas, which are handy from a practitioner's point of view. What Goleman has to say [in *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*], for instance, is all good stuff. It's all the sort of stuff that places like CCL have been teaching for the past thirty years, but updated with the latest research in neuropsychology, into emotions and emotional

intelligence. It's basically an updated, sexed-up version of the product that's been on the market for a long time.

**SR: Can leaders develop emotional intelligence, and if so, how?**

**NA:** There's a multipart answer to that one. Answer number one is representative of the results of a study I did [with doctoral student Peter Jordan, now an associate professor of management at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia] on group performance and emotional intelligence in groups. In that study, basically, at the end of the training program, the low emotional intelligence and high emotional intelligence groups were performing at the same level. And yet in that study the measure of emotional intelligence was taken at the end. So they were performing at the same level, but there was variance in their emotional intelligence. And if you wanted to put the results of that study in a nutshell, you could say that the high-performing groups are either emotionally intelligent or highly trained. And the same is true in college. Some really smart kids don't do any work but get high scores. Then there are the not-nearly-so-smart guys who work and study hard and end up with the same grades as the smart kids who did little or nothing. So if the exams are a sort of measure of intelligence, then you can say—just as in the study that we did—that intelligence is something that comes from either an innate capacity or a lot of hard work. I think we know that the people who succeed in the end are not necessarily the ones with high intelligence. They're the ones with high levels of motivation. When you couple motivation with intelligence, you generally get people who are the most successful. I think it's the same, to a large extent, with emotional intelligence. One of the things about emotions, particularly in what might be called the Protestant-work-ethic cultures, such as those in Northern Europe, the United States, and Australia, is that there has been a cultural tendency to dismiss

emotions, to say that we shouldn't really be feeling emotions. So those groups have put emotions aside and are literally having to be retrained to use those emotions that the people from other cultures can already use. So there are a lot of interesting questions there.

**SR: Have any differences been found between men and women in their levels of emotional intelligence?**

**NA:** Most of the Mayer and Salovey studies consistently have shown that females are better. In other studies there have been mixed results.

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**SR: Can you speculate why women would have higher levels of emotional intelligence than men? Is it genetic? Or cultural?**

**NA:** I think it can be explained in terms of evolutionary psychology, that women have more highly developed nurturing skills. The skills associated with emotional intelligence—particularly the ability to spot emotional changes in offspring and deal with those issues and manage those emotions—are much more important to women than to men, who are going off hunting the prey and that sort of thing. One of my former students, Marta Sinclair [now a lecturer in the Department of International Business and Asian Studies at Griffith University], is doing some work with intuition, and in simulated intuition, females come out better. Not always; there are exceptions.

**SR: How can leaders best measure and assess their emotional skills and find out their level of emotional intelligence?**

**NA:** Number one, I would avoid the Bar-On scale or any scale that tends to mix up dimensions of personalities. I think that those scales, while useful in some respects, tend to muddy the waters. Of course, everybody knows how popular the Myers-Briggs [Type Indicator] is for managers. And while Myers-Briggs does not really have much validity from the point of view of psychologists studying personality, it is a useful tool for the development of skills in management, especially to help managers understand that people have different perspectives, different styles.

So when it comes down to emotional intelligence, should managers necessarily be doing only the [Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test]? I think the answer to that is no, as well. The MSCEIT is still a handy thing, however. If we are going to argue that there are individual differences with emotions and that emotions are important, then it is useful to know how you stand with respect to the four branches of emotional intelligence [perceiving and identifying emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions in a way that enhances personal growth and social relations].

I think that Goleman's Emotional Competency Inventory is an OK tool, too. To a large extent it is a combination of a series of skills, including emotional skills and social skills, but I think they're important skills.

**SR: You have talked about a possible dark side of charismatic leadership. That it would be possible for a malignant leader who is high in emotional intelligence to use that intelligence for negative purposes. Could you talk a little bit about that?**

**NA:** There is the idea that emotional intelligence can be used for evil ends by a leader who wishes to be manipulative. If pseudo-charismatic leaders with high emotional intelligence misuse their skills, they have a powerful ability to manipulate the emotions of their followers for evil ends. On the other side of the equation, followers who have high emotional intelligence should be able to see through these sorts of ploys. So the idea is that organizations should make sure that the pseudo-charismatic leaders don't have their way. They need to make sure that their employees are sensitive to these sorts of cues and this sort of emotional intelligence. One study [by doctoral student Marie Dasborough], purely from the followers' perspective, indicates that employees with high emotional intelligence are better able to sense such manipulative attempts by leaders than are employees who are low in emotional intelligence.

**SR: Is there any advice that you could give to managers to help them apply their emotional skills?**

**NA:** Advice number one is don't ignore emotions. There is a tendency among managers to believe that to be most effective, they should totally shut the door on emotions. That is the most irrational thing a manager can assume, that somehow people can be managed without including the emotional dimension. Another piece of advice is related to research into affective events theory, which says that hassles and uplifts lead to emotional states that affect attitudes and behaviors. It turns out from the research that the frequency of hassles and uplifts is more important than their intensity. A limited number of negative events—hassles—just cause an eruption, and that's the end of it. People can cope with one or two upsets at work and move on; what gets them down is the unrelenting, day-after-day upsets and their accumulation over time. The boss comes

in and doesn't say good morning; the boss deals snappily with people, is dismissive, ignores employees, makes statements that don't really recognize day-to-day contributions, and chides people for being even the tiniest bit late. These very small things just accumulate and ultimately lead to a very high level of negative feelings, and consequences flow from that. On the other side of the coin are the managers who are always doing little nice things. They have got to be much more successful than the managers who think that a big prize-giving ceremony or party will somehow make up for constant mistreatment. There are plenty of examples

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of bosses who treat their employees extremely badly and think it's all made up with a big Christmas party or prize-giving ceremony or putting employees' photos on the wall.

**SR: Do you think that organizations and their leaders, now that they've been tuned in to the fact that emotions play a key role in organizational dynamics, are going to focus more on this area? And if so, how could they do this most effectively?**

**NA:** I think they already are doing this. I think that to a large extent it's the consulting organizations, like CCL, that have been pushing this line very strongly for a while now. Bob

Dick, an educator, facilitator, and consultant in Brisbane, has a model that he uses called FIDO, which stands for feelings, information, decisions, and outcomes. The basic idea of the model is that outcomes are based on decisions and decisions are based on information, but information can be distorted by feelings. So if you don't deal with feelings you can have distorted information, which results in incorrect decisions and inappropriate outcomes. If you don't deal with the feelings, that comes back around and bites you at the other end with inappropriate outcomes. But I think that human relations consultants have known this since the 1950s. I think the ones who have been a little slow to pick up on this have been the academic researchers, until recently, when studies have shown that emotional variables do make a difference and that organizations are saturated with emotions. It has been snowballing and bringing emotions much more out into the foreground. And so managers are feeling much more comfortable with emotions, and this is accompanied by a societal move in that direction. Twenty years ago it was unthinkable for a politician to shed a tear, even under very tearful circumstances. These days you're not going to make it as a politician unless you regularly shed tears. It's a societal thing that's happening in the Anglo societies in particular. When I think back to my engineering days, we didn't display emotions; we weren't allowed to regard emotions. It was just totally off the agenda, and you can't manage emotions if you ignore them. If you can't manage your own emotions or those of your employees, you just can't manage effectively. So I think much progress has been made in that managers are at least becoming aware of their emotions, talking about them, expressing them, and dealing with them, and that is helping to build emotionally healthy organizations. ✍