

## The Motion of Emotion

**By Lac D. Su, M.S.  
and Tanya Goodwin-Maslach**

Imagine the feeling you get when you're watching a suspenseful movie. The main character is scuba diving in deep water and, having just felt something brush by him, is trying desperately to see in an underwater world that is illuminated only slightly by the ambient light. As he anxiously searches his surroundings, the camera shares his vision with you, heightening your sense of unease. Even with the volume turned off your heart is beating and you wish the character would just "get out of there."

The same type of stress happens in the real world. Consider Jerry, a project manager for a five person team who is proud of his position and takes extra precaution to ensure his team doesn't make mistakes. At a team meeting he details tasks for each team member to accomplish that week, and then he decides to take care of half of them himself without telling anyone.

Why do some managers do this? The short answer is because they are wired to. Biologically speaking, we're built to do one of two things in the face of threat or danger: run really fast in the opposite direction, or stand our ground and fight like a champ. Deciding on a rational action during a heightened state of emotion is secondary to our survival instinct. In our scenario, Jerry feels he is fighting like a champ.

**"In fear, the brain starves the heart  
of its bravest blood"**

**- Kall**

Let's see how Jerry's brain is working in this situation. His initial reaction to a project deadline is at least mild anxiety. Even if he isn't completely aware of it, he's likely to feel his security and control are threatened by the chance of failure. To make things worse, he doesn't have direct control over how and when all tasks will be completed. Jerry's method for managing this emotion is micromanaging his staff. In this case, he takes on his team member's tasks to make sure they are done right and on time.

Everything we experience passes through the emotional part of our brains first, called the limbic system. A trigger event, such as meeting a deadline, is "felt" by the limbic system before we have any rational reaction to the circumstance. Emotions like fear and happiness are always felt first. Then, the rational part of the brain gets a crack at choosing the direction to head in response to the situation.

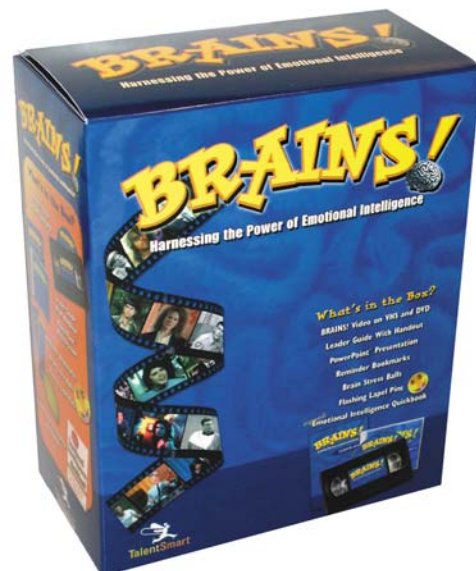
If the rational part of Jerry's brain is missing, he would act on these trigger events compulsively without thinking. Since the "thinking" part of his brain is intact, he is choosing to act on his anxiety over trusting the abilities of team members. So why doesn't he?

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Jerry is likely unaware of his emotions, and doesn't fully recognize how his actions affect those around him. He needs to build skill in managing his emotions to improve his own performance, as well as his relationship with his team. Without this change, team members will become increasingly frustrated by him, and the resulting mistrust will decrease their motivation and efficacy. In the end, Jerry's micromanagement prevents him from focusing on higher level tasks and priorities. It becomes a vicious circle.

Let's look at Jerry after he and others have learned more about the physiology behind emotional intelligence (EQ) and his own EQ skills. After that meeting, instead of performing team member's tasks himself, he meets with team members individually to let them know he is available to help. He reiterates the importance of timing. Since team members are aware of his goals for improving his EQ skills, they recognize this effort and promise to update him regularly. Jerry returns to his office less stressed and more confident in his team's ability to reach the desired business goals.

We know it's important to seek to understand situations first before we go charging ahead to judge them. Wouldn't it be smart to use this same thinking when working with others? Before concluding that your employee or boss just can't manage, let Talentsmart®'s BRAINS! VHS and DVD package show you otherwise. It provides an engaging introduction to emotional intelligence, complete with clips from Hollywood movies to illustrate EQ in action. BRAINS! is a complete training program with leader materials, participant handouts, and a PowerPoint® presentation.



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Lac's expertise is in emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, communication, decision-making, and adaptability. Lac has experience consulting to both the private and public sectors. Lac has a Masters degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology. Lac is completing his Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the same institution.

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Tanya Goodwin-Maslach is a Professional Services Consultant with TalentSmart®. She specializes in leadership development and organizational culture change. She develops and facilitates leader retreats and workshops, and writes about leadership development strategies for domestic and global organizations.

She has served on the Board of the San Diego Chapter of The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) and Chaired a Governance Committee to develop tools for strengthening the leadership capabilities of the chapter. Tanya holds a B.S. in Marine Zoology from Oregon State University and is completing her M.A. in Industrial-Organizational Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology.