

Emotions

(aka subconscious data processing)

Our training as engineers has enabled us to assimilate and process information very effectively so that we produce quick, accurate and effective technical solutions. But every strength has its flip side.

MARTIN RINGER examines the influence of feelings and intuition in the engineering workplace.

THE EMPHASIS on calculation in engineers' training often results in our losing access to a huge amount of vital data about ourselves, relationships and the organizations for which we work. This lost information could otherwise be used to improve our work-place effectiveness and well-being.

How so? You might ask.

The problem is that the rational brain can only process about seven pieces of data at any one time, and we are constantly bombarded with much more than that. Fortunately, the data that the rational mind can't assimilate is captured and processed beneath our awareness by non-rational parts of the brain, and re-appears as intuition and feelings. We can't use intuition and feelings to determine the diameter of a pipe or the size of a footing, but we need to use this rich source of data in our relating with other people, in our functioning in teams and meetings and in paying attention to our own health.

An example of the loss of vital data: Imagine that you are in a meeting to discuss the early design phase of a major project. There are fifteen people in the room and one person is at the front using a Powerpoint slide show to outline the scope, time frame and expected cost of the project. There are questions, answers and a lot of shuffling and sighing in the room. You are simultaneously aware of fourteen other people, the "factual" data that is being presented, your own unspoken questions about your place on this project (will you be appointed as a team leader?), your recent disagreement with the person sitting next to you, the fact that you've got to pick up the kids in an hour and the meeting is going very slowly... there's too much to hold in your mind all at once. And so you drift off. Voices fade from awareness and the image of a sinking oil platform drifts into your

vision. Your heart starts to race with fear. Then, with a start, you catch yourself and look around quickly to see if anyone noticed that you've lost the plot. Whew! Nobody noticed. Now you dismiss the image of the sinking platform and push away the feeling of fear while you try to pick up on what you've missed.

But you've not missed anything. There *is* an impending disaster and everyone else in the room is acting as though nothing is wrong. Most people in the room are uncomfortable and they think that they're the only ones who are. So, being good engineers, they focus on the facts and dismiss the intuition and feeling. The image of the sinking oil platform is a very accurate picture of this project. In fact the technical aspects of the project are fine, but the organizational politics will ensure that it won't succeed and everyone knows that. Your intuition is absolutely spot-on but you've just dismissed it!

This example is taken from a real situation and probably resembles in some way your own experience. The pervasive culture of engineering organizations is to dismiss or even ridicule feelings and intuition. My suggestion is that we should emphasise *feelings and intuition* when we are dealing with *human* situations and emphasise *thinking and rationality* when we are dealing with *technical* situations. I'm suggesting that one aspect is emphasised whilst the other is kept in mind. It's almost never useful to swing totally to emotion and intuition or totally to rationality.

Memory is emotion-related too

We can lose access to information in another way when we dismiss our feelings. Recent research in neuroscience has found that memory is a complex system for the storage, processing and accessing of information. It is not just a storage-retrieval system. In fact some kinds

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RE in classifying a grain silo as such against Customs Service attempts to classify it as a prefabricated building for tariff purposes. The court held that while Customs had relied on a classification opinion by the Customs Cooperation Council, the very nature of grain storage bins and silos has more in common with agricultural machinery than a building.

Water Rights Unconditional

Wheeler Forrest Associates Ltd v Farquar

14 March 2001, Christchurch High Court, Justice Chisolm presiding. WFAL sought, and largely failed, to obtain declarations that it was entitled to impose conditions on F and other landowners in their use of a well on WFAL property over which they had an easement. The Court held there was no conflict between the Land Transfer Act and the Resource Management Act in law or in this case. WFAL's efforts to seek to charge other landowners were rebuffed other than in the collection of a levy for the maintenance of the service.

Vicarious Liability Established by Law Lords

Lister v Hesley Hall Ltd

3 May 2001, House of Lords. The case concerned the liability of a school where a warden had molested boys in his care. Lord Hobhouse said: "If the act of a servant which gives rise to the servant's liability to the plaintiff amounted to a failure by the servant to perform that duty, the act comes within 'the scope of his employment' and the employer is vicariously liable. If, on the other hand the servant's employment merely gave the servant the opportunity to do what he did without more there will be no vicarious liability. In short the duties of care of the employer determine the responsibility and hence liability of that employer."

PRACTICE

of memories can only be accessed when you are experiencing an emotion similar in kind to the emotion that you were experiencing when the memory was created. Thus, limiting our emotional response to events in the work-place also limits access to important data that is stored in our memories; that's a bit like turning off G drive on the intranet server.

Emotions are the raw data for relationships

There's nothing more frustrating than trying to have a conversation with a person who is non-verbally communicating some kind of emotion like anger, but verbally denying his or her anger. It's impossible to trust someone who demonstrates this kind of incongruence. So maintaining an ongoing awareness of your own emotional state is a prerequisite to taking your part in effective workplace relationships.

Health

Emotions are the body's language of health. Not only do they integrate complex information about the outside world, but emotions also collate information about the state of our bodies. People who consistently over-

ride or deny these "health" messages from their bodies are more likely to suffer from stress-related diseases than those who are better attuned to their emotions.

So what?

I'm not advocating a return to babyhood where every emotion is experienced and expressed at the same instant. Mature psychological functioning requires us to restrain our expression of emotions at times. But the difference between experiencing and expressing is too often lost. Nor am I suggesting that you or your organization should make a fad of something like "emotional intelligence" programs at the expense of the business or technical aspects of your work.

Two simple things may add value to the quality of your work and the health and effectiveness of your organization's culture:

- A regular check-in with yourself where you deliberately pay attention to your physical and emotional states – and starting to acknowledge these states in conversations with trusted colleagues.
- Deliberately making a place in meetings and conversations for emotional and intuitive data. This rich information deserves a place alongside technical data.

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(Those interested in the theoretical basis for the article or who require further information are welcome to contact the author.) martinringer@compuserve.com or www.martinringer.com

Get your stuff and get out!

Sometimes the workplace can get dead unpleasant. Even professionals can have conflicts of values and style which escalate out of control. Engineers are typically strong, resourceful people, who will work hard as a point of pride in the most difficult circumstances. But there are times when even professionals need help when employment situations go wrong.

The Institution of Professional Engineers stands behind its members with a professional contracts negotiator in case there is trouble. Most of the time you won't need this service. But it can be very reassuring to know that when times are tough the Institution will lend a hand.

For more information call Virginia Burton 0-4-474 8936.

