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# Leadership: What Have Upsets Got to Do With It?

## By Dwight Frindt

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*"The ability to identify and clear upsets, in myself and others, is the single most significant key to productivity gains in our economy." — D. R. Frindt*

We have asked our executive-leadership clients a simple question: "What time could you go home if everyone in the company simply came to work, did their jobs and went home?"

The answer used to surprise us until it kept being repeated. On average, our clients say, "Between 10:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m."

That begs a second question. If so many executives claim they could go home before lunch if everyone just showed up and did their work, what's taking so much of our leaders' time? Our clients tell us flat out: distress, commonly known as upsets. The most time-consuming part of their job is managing the distressed interactions within their teams so that those teams can actually get to the business at hand.

Okay, let's assume there's some exaggeration at play here, fueled by frustration and wry humor. But even if executives will never be able to consistently leave by noon, it is entirely reasonable for them to expect to save at least two hours of their time, every day. That's nearly 500 extra hours a year leaders can devote to creative thinking, visioning and strategizing rather than on repairing. At the opportunity cost of most executives' time, that amounts to very substantial savings. Of course, the same can be said for everyone in the organization. An inordinate amount of productive time and payroll dollars and worse yet, opportunities, are lost daily, monthly and annually to the distraction caused by unresolved emotional distress.

### **What it takes to change**

Displacing that time/energy/resource loss is of paramount importance. Doing so can create a culture that is both highly productive and emotionally resilient and rewarding. It requires a fundamental, transformative shift in two steps: 1) fewer emotionally driven issues in the workplace; and 2) leaders and their team members become self-sufficient in handling emotional distress issues when they occur.

Let's clarify what we mean by "emotional distress." We're using the term to summarize a wide range of reactions that temporarily disable people with regard to thoughtful and productive behavior. These reactions can vary from mild frustration to full-blown anger, and include embarrassment, sadness, impatience, agitation, worry and fear. In each case the person is left in a condition where, whether realized or not, they are acting as if their very survival is threatened.

### **The causes of emotional distress**

Our studies and our clients' experiences make it clear that the most common root causes of workplace emotional distress are 1) the perception that a promise has been broken (usually by leadership); 2) when positive intentions "fail"; and 3) when commitments seem thwarted. In addition to these three internal triggers, there are many times when personal distress is brought to the workplace from the rest of the person's life. This external source can be especially difficult to address due to varying perspectives on what constitutes personal/professional boundaries.



The impact on the productivity and organizational effectiveness of people attempting to work while “stressed out” (or surrounded by others who are) is enormous. Yet it’s been our observation that most leaders overlook this as the place to start any efforts in business improvement. Most are far more comfortable with cost cutting, process development, process improvement, reorganizing or some other business change that does not directly address the human dimension.

### **Traditional models of training**

To help disarm this apparent reluctance to actively engage when emotional distress is present, we began several years ago to bring our clients a variety of expert presentations, books and other training opportunities for building communication and issue-resolution skills. Even though there are many excellent resources available in this field, we were disappointed in the results. Our clients’ progress after exposure to all this material was not significantly improved. Their ability and skill in managing emotional distress didn’t dramatically change.

So what went wrong? Why didn’t all that training and exposure to skill-building help when emotional distress was triggered? The problem is not in the content of the material. It’s in the limitation of its focus. Most of this highly regarded material addresses and is received by the intellectual part of the mind. That’s fine, as far as it goes, but too often the audience comes away with a conceptual understanding while gaining little or no real skill at changing behavior. Providing access to new information and a broader intellectual understanding is a good start, but it’s only a start. Unless this information is somehow deeply absorbed and embodied beyond the intellect, it vanishes when people are challenged and faced with intense emotion—their own or that of others.

### **Understanding our bodies’ role**

Studies have shown that to learn a new physical skill takes 300 repetitions for muscle-memory to be developed and 3,000 repetitions for the skill to be “embodied.” In a similar way, we believe that for intellectual learning to really take root, it must be practiced repeatedly. In addition, there are key physical components that impact intellectual learning, especially when someone is faced with stress. Without awareness of these physical components, it’s almost impossible to learn to address distress differently. We are finding that the physical aspects of being in an emotionally distressed state are as important as the feelings themselves. These two elements are inextricably linked. Ignoring or overlooking the physical manifestations of emotion limits our ability to manage emotional distress.

Examining the physical signs of distress, brain researchers are now giving us valuable understanding of the physiological dimension of our emotional reactions. This fundamental information is extremely useful for business leaders. For example, let’s look at a physical process sometimes referred to as “limbic hijacking.”

The limbic system is the part of the brain associated with emotion and memory. Within the limbic system are the amygdalae, two almond-shaped clusters of neurons whose primary responsibilities include scanning for danger and warning us of impending threats. A limbic hijacking occurs when the amygdalae are triggered, producing physical sensations of distress. Some common signals of the amygdalae’s work include sweaty palms, tense shoulders, dry mouth and “butterflies in the stomach.” As the intensity of distress rises, the strength of the physical signals increases...and our rational, cognitive powers diminish.

## **A biological early warning system**

In their role as instinctual guardians, the amygdalae are part of our biological early warning system. They help ensure our physical survival by triggering four simple reactions: fight, flight, freeze or appease.

They respond instinctively, with lightning speed—much faster than the thinking portions of our brain.

For our early ancestors, who were dealing with a natural world that presented many real, life-threatening dangers, this function was essential to survival. But in today's corporate workplace, amygdalae reactions can often hinder instead of help. Here's why. As we've said, the amygdalae react instinctively, nearly instantaneously. Unfortunately, they can't differentiate between a real or imagined threat. They also can't distinguish between a physical threat and one generated by words or our own thoughts. And when the amygdalae send their warnings, they set in motion powerful forces throughout the body. Adrenaline and cortisol are released, raising heart rate and blood pressure. Blood drains from "less important" areas (such as our thinking brain) and goes to those areas needed for physical defense. We become a reactionary machine: on guard, on edge. Not the best state for thoughtful discourse, creative problem-solving or associative collaboration.

## **Post-stress mess**

That's just the beginning. There are also the after-effects. If we were running from a bear in the woods like our ancestors, that extreme physical effort would consume much of the excess adrenaline and cortisol released by the amygdalae's warnings of danger. Because of that, soon after the danger had passed, our heart rate and blood pressure would drop and we would return to a more relaxed, thoughtful state.

In the office, this doesn't happen. On a typical working day the amygdalae may perceive many "threatening" situations. And even though these "dangers" take the form of spoken words or private thoughts rather than outside physical threats to our survival, they still trigger the same biological reactions. We get hyped up in self-defense mode, with nowhere to run off the floods of adrenaline and cortisol. Without a release, our heart rate and blood pressure stay high, other physical sensations continue, and we experience protracted stress. At a minimum, we're frustrated, distracted and unproductive; certainly unable to be our most creative. In high-stress environments where perceived threats occur even more frequently, people may end up missing work altogether due to physical illness or needing a "mental health day." Under these conditions, the risk of burnout is high.

The amygdalae and limbic system, along with the brain stem, form what is commonly called the "old brain." In fact, the brain stem is sometimes referred to as the "reptilian brain" because it can be found in all vertebrates, including reptiles and mammals. It has to do with our most basic functions: breathing, sleeping, blood circulation, muscle contraction, reproduction and self-preservation. Coupled with the limbic system's early warning system of danger, the reptilian brain provides a powerful image and an important clue in how behavior manifests during distress.

Picture the angry team leader raging in a team meeting. It doesn't take a great leap from there to imagine everyone around the table instantly transformed into iguanas, geckos and gila monsters, each caught in their own reaction and defensive/offensive posturing. It is hard to imagine that many executives actually intend to have their companies managed by a group of reptiles. Yet this kind of behavior is regularly triggered and allowed to persist.

Given the primitive, instinctual physical reactions associated with being upset, it's no wonder that all those advanced conceptual-learning approaches are not very helpful in reducing the effects of emotional distress. The information we learn in those training workshops are stored and processed in the cerebral cortex, the "new," rational part of the brain. But as we've seen, when we get upset we begin functioning from an entirely different place, a different part of the brain.

### **The solution begins at the top**

So how do we bridge the gap between the thinking and feeling brain? How do we make use of both our higher reasoning and our emotional passion that fires so much of our inspiration and creativity? How do we do that in a way that minimizes reactivity and distress while increasing productivity and shared pride of ownership? Leaders can use the answers to get more of their own thoughtful time back and enhance their ability to focus on critical business issues. Team members can use the answers to raise their individual and collective productivity in ways that enhance their lives rather than increasing their stress. In both cases, people are able to move from an experience of trying to survive to one of thriving.

We propose that leaders start by working on themselves. The truth is, organizations look to their executives to set the tone. If those executives are highly reactive, in all likelihood their organizations will be too. On the other hand, if leaders learn to identify and clear their own emotional distress first, they'll be more productive, they'll trigger less stress within their teams, and they'll be much better equipped to support team members in navigating their own emotional reactions.

We've seen it time and again. As leaders begin to experience the benefits of their increased ability to "de-stress" emotionally, it becomes an obvious investment to train others. Just as mounting stress can create its own snowball effect in a team, team members can begin to build a new kind momentum of converting distress to eustress (healthy, productive stress – as in the excitement of pursuing a challenging goal). The more individuals there are who can identify and clear their own emotional distress, the easier it becomes for other colleagues to join them in maintaining a balance of thoughtful productivity and emotional engagement. It's a process that when fully committed to, can transform a culture.

While lasting change takes time and continuous practice, there are a few simple, critically important steps that can begin to immediately repair the damage of emotional distress. These diagnostic and intervention steps are both conceptual and physical. They give your intellect the information and your body the tools to change both experience and behavior.

### **The 2130 Partners recipe for identifying and clearing distress:**

**1) Learn to observe and identify body sensations that signal a "limbic hijacking" is taking place.** It sounds obvious, but many people have no awareness of their physical state when they're upset. Yet this information is critical to implementing lasting change. So practice. With a bit of self-observation, most of us can say (for example), "I feel pressure in my chest," "I feel blood rushing to my neck," "I stiffen up," "I get this feeling in the pit of my stomach." It's essential to develop the skill of recognizing your physical symptoms. It's so important, in fact, that this physical information comes before anything else in the intervention process. Practice this step until you have a clear understanding of your reactions.

**2) Exhale and slow down your breathing.** After you've learned to identify that you're in a "hijacked" state, you can incorporate the practice of altering your breathing. The quickest and most effective method to immediately calm the "fight or flight" response is to take long, slow, deep breaths. When stressed, it's common to hold your breath or to take very shallow breaths as part of your defensive response. Exhaling fully and slowing down your breathing is simple. It's also quite possibly the most important and powerful antidote to emotional distress.

**3) Identify your amygdalae-triggered reaction.** Learn to observe your automatic defense. Are you doing fight (assertiveness/attack), flight (mentally checking out or even physically leaving the room), freeze (deer-in-the-headlights, unable to think of what to do next) or appease ("sucking up," e.g., "Oh, yes, I know exactly what you mean," or "I'm with you on that.")? Depending on the circumstances, you're likely to have one reaction that triggers as your default defensive position. As you realize what your reaction is, you'll also start to see its limits and its impact on others. This awareness actually builds the capacity to choose different behavior that gets you more of what you intend.

**4) Stop trying to drive your agenda.** When under emotional distress, you're more likely to make statements that you'll later wish you could eat (and may have to). One of the most productive steps you can take in a moment of upset is to stop talking, breathe and observe. Allow yourself some time. Is there really a reason to rush? If you can learn to step back and observe your own distress, or simply stay calm in the face of another's distress, there's an opportunity for a positive outcome.

**5) Ask yourself a "brain-switching" question.** The amygdalae can only respond to a perceived threat such as "Is that a bear and is it going to eat me?" Unfortunately, since they cannot tell the difference between a physical threat and a threat in language, they go off frequently in the office or home where there hasn't been a bear sighting in years. You can reactivate your thinking capacities by coming up with a reminder question. Use this question consistently (almost like a mantra) to activate the cerebral cortex of the brain. For example, ask yourself something that brings you back to a big-picture perspective: "What was the purpose of this meeting?" "What are we committed to here?" The relative sophistication of such a question will refocus your thinking and energy and will allow your system to relax.

**6) Invoke Exploration Listening:** Choose to move from File Cabinet Listening (disconnected or judgmental) to Exploration Listening (connected & curious). Be present and purposeful. Give your brain the assignment of listening for content, worries (fears) & purpose. Staying present to one's situation and fears can revitalize access to the Yonder Star that is seemingly threatened (Beyond the Mask of Fear).

**7) Practice, practice, practice.** You (and everyone else) have had decades of practice developing specific defensive reactions to distress. These reactions can be triggered by so many kinds of comments, tones of voice, and even facial expressions that you'll have to work hard to refine your "brain switching." In the beginning, it may not be possible to catch yourself before you're already in the throes of a defensive, stressful conversation. However, with practice it's possible to read the symptoms of defensiveness in your body and to mitigate the oncoming emotional reactions. If you commit yourself, it will become a lifelong discipline, and it will be well worth it!