

## 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 deep water diving and, having just felt something brush by her, is trying desperately to see in an underwater world that is illuminated only slightly by the ambient light. As she anxiously searches her surroundings, the camera shares her vision with us, heightening our sense of unease. Even with the volume turned off our hearts are beating and we're willing the character to just "get out of there".

The same type of stress happens in the real world, such as the workplace. Jerry is a project manager for a five person team and is proud of his position. He worked hard to get there and takes extra precaution to ensure his team doesn't make mistakes that would jeopardize his situation. After another group meeting, where he detailed tasks for all his team members to accomplish, he decided to take care of one of those tasks himself. What if Lisa, a team member, couldn't get to it soon enough? Okay, so she had two weeks, but he had time now and he was the manager, so why not just do it? This way he could ensure it was done on time and the way he expected it to get done. In an email to Lisa the following day, Jerry notified her he took care of Customer ABC and he wanted to learn how she'd progressed on the other items on her 'to do' list.

Why do some managers do this? The short answer is because they are wired to. Biologically speaking, we're

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

built to do one of three things in the face of threat or danger: run really fast in the opposite direction, stand our ground and fight like a champ, or just freeze and hope the threat goes away. Deciding on a rational action during a heightened state of emotion is secondary to our survival instinct. In our scenario, Jerry is fighting like a champ.

Let's see how Jerry's brain is working in this situation. His initial reaction to a stimulus like a project deadline is the emotion anxiety. He may feel his security and control are being threatened since he may not have direct control over how and when tasks are completed. Jerry's method for managing this emotion is by micromanaging his staff. In this case, he takes up one of Lisa's tasks to make sure it's done right and on time.

In all emotional reactions, there is a pathway in the brain for feeling and reacting to an emotion. A trigger event (meeting a deadline) is registered in the back of the brain through the spinal cord and passes through the middle part of the brain – the limbic system. Emotions like fear and happiness are felt here first before our rational side, the front side of our brain, ever gets a crack at making sense of them. Hypothetically, if Jerry's "rational" part of the brain is missing, he would act on these trigger events compulsively without thinking.

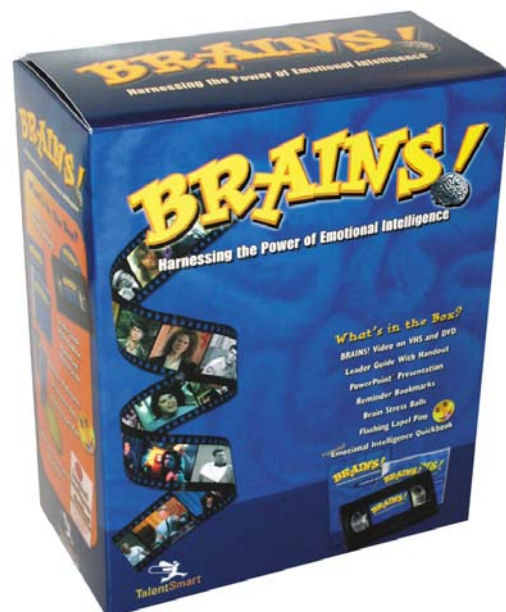
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Since the “thinking” part of his brain is intact, he should be able to think things through before acting on them. So why isn’t he?

Jerry may not be aware of his emotions and how they affect others, or skilled yet in how to manage them for improving his own performance and relationships. The interconnectedness of self-awareness and self-management ultimately has sweeping consequences for Lisa and the team’s work performance. Lisa could become increasingly frustrated and the resulting mistrust can decrease her motivation and efficacy. In the end, Lisa may try to leave the team or the company. For Jerry, his multi-tasking prevented him from focusing on higher level tasks and priorities and erodes his trust in Lisa’s skills. It becomes a vicious circle.

Let’s look at Jerry after he and others have learned more about the physiology behind emotional intelligence and his own EQ skills. After that meeting, instead of calling the client himself, he meets with Lisa and lets her know he is available to her should she need support and reiterates the timing. Since Lisa is aware of his working goals to improve his EQ skills, she recognizes this as a developmental effort to improve his effectiveness as a leader. She thanks him, says she will complete her task prior to deadline and update him with quick progress reports, and then comments on his successful skill development. Jerry returns to his office less stressed and more confident in his team’s, and his own, 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 thinking for our own skill development? Before concluding that your employee or boss just can’t manage, let Talentsmart®’s *BRAINS!* Video and DVD package show you otherwise. In it you’ll find an engaging introduction to EQ, complete with video clips highlighting Hollywood celebrities and United States Presidents using (and not using) emotional intelligence skills, Guides for leaders wanting to train in EQ for two-hour and half day formats, and a PowerPoint presentation for presenting the value of EQ to business leaders in your organization.



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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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Lac is Manager of Strategic Alliances for Talentsmart®, a leading provider of emotional intelligence services and web-based assessments. Lac's background includes research on leadership competencies, creating assessment instruments, and designing training programs and e-learning activities.

Lac's expertise is in emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, communication, decisiveness and 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 will complete his Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the same institution.

#### Tanya Goodwin-Maslach

Tanya Goodwin-Maslach specializes in leadership development and organizational culture change. She has developed and facilitated leader retreats and workshops, coordinated and led professional development programs, and written on leadership development strategies for domestic and global organizations.

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