

THE PROGRAM

LETTERS ON LEADERSHIP

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- LETTER ON LEADERSHIP #86 -



-Reggie Miller and the Indiana Pacers just took the lead in Game 4 of the 1998 Eastern Conference Finals. The entire building went nuts - except for one person, the head coach, Larry Bird. With 0.7 seconds left, Bird knew not to start celebrating just yet.

Everything we do in life is done as a member of a team. On all those teams we are privileged to be a part of, we all fill one of two roles - teammate and leader. Success, therefore, depends on our making a commitment to be the best teammate and leader we can be. Hopefully, we will be surrounded by others who make that same commitment. We must make that commitment on days that are seventy degrees and sunny and, most importantly, on days when it's not! We must make that commitment when things are going well and, crucially, when they aren't. To do so, to have the intestinal fortitude to commit to being the best teammate and leader that we can be, and then go and be that person, requires toughness. And lots of it!

All our lives are some percentage physical and some mental. If you are a laborer, your life might require a greater amount of physical toughness. Conversely, if you hold a

managerial position, your life might require greater mental resiliency. Regardless of the proportion of physical versus mental in our lives, though, human beings are emotional beings. 100% emotional beings. As such, if we are going to be the best teammates and leaders we can be, we must be emotionally tough or resilient.

Unfortunately, we aren't born tough. Children get mad; they throw temper tantrums. They kick and scream. And by "children," I don't mean just actual children. Just because someone is 43, they may still be a child: a three-year-old child for forty years. Thankfully, although we aren't born with emotional toughness, we can develop it! To start, it is important to understand that emotional toughness does not mean having no emotions. No emotions mean we are psychopaths. Instead, we must, in fact, be acutely in touch with our emotions. To be emotionally tough, we must first recognize when we are experiencing a significant emotion.

Next, emotional toughness requires emotional intelligence: a sensitivity to the emotions and feelings of others, particularly when we say or do something which impacts them in some way. It also describes the extent to which we are emotionally sensitive to the actions, words, and deeds of others. That is, to what extent we are aware of our emotional reactions to their feelings and emotions.¹

First, be emotionally aware of the emotions you and your teammates are experiencing. Second, be emotionally intelligent. Taking a deep breath, a sip of water, or even better, something to eat helps us to be emotionally intelligent. It activates our parasympathetic nervous system, which makes the next thing, the mission-critical thing that emotionally tough people do, easier. They think (think is the key word), "How do I best respond to this natural human emotion that I feel so that it will best help my team accomplish its mission?" Emotionally tough teammates think rationally rather than react emotionally. In contrast, an emotion-driven person, for example, screams and yells when they are angry. They flail and throw temper tantrums. No emotional awareness. No emotional intelligence. No emotional toughness. Just driven by emotion.

Emotionally tough or resilient teammates have and feel emotions but remain mission-focused despite those emotions rather than be controlled by them. This isn't to say that we shouldn't show or express our emotions in a manner that makes us feel better, but it should only be done at a time and place of our choosing and when it doesn't interfere with our or our team accomplishing the mission. Unfortunately, too often, when faced with adversity, coaches yell and scream, argue with other assistant coaches, and slam their clipboards down on the ground in fits of rage. That release of anger may make a coach feel better, but does it help their team accomplish the mission? Athletes exhibit the same lack of emotional resiliency as coaches, as do spouses, parents, teachers, and business leaders.

Remember that it is not just anger that can lead to poor outcomes either. As an example, happiness can lead to complacency, and the team with a two-touchdown lead finds themselves losing five minutes later. Corporate teams enjoy their greatest success one year and then some of their greatest disappointment the next. Once happy couples end

¹ Emotional Intelligence, Apr 19, 2021, Doug Strycharczyk, Mental Toughness, [Mental Toughness and Emotional Intelligence - AQR International](#)

relationships because their union “got stale.” It wasn’t stale on their wedding day, though...

To be clear, showing emotion, be it anger, happiness, or any other, is not wrong. Quite the contrary. A fiery (be it angry or super positive) speech at halftime or during an all-hands meeting has helped motivate countless athletic and business teams to greater performance in their respective “second halves.” The problem, therefore, isn’t the emotion. The problem is not thinking about how we should respond to the emotion we are feeling to ensure the best outcome for our team. The problem is our lack of emotional toughness.

The best teammates and leaders, those who are able to stay mission-focused rather than emotionally driven, recognize that they are experiencing a particular emotion, acknowledge it, and then choose how to respond to it so that it ensures, as an example, that they and their spouse accomplish the mission of having as strong a partnership/marriage, as possible. Coaches and business leaders respond to their emotions in a manner that they feel will best help their athletes and coworkers achieve their greatest success.

Make emotional resiliency a habit. Here are a few tips on how to do so: first, don’t respond immediately! Prior to hitting “send,” sleep on it. If in a verbal argument, tell your teammate that you are feeling emotional and need time (and probably space, too) to think about what you truly believe before responding. Contrary to what we might have read or been told through Social Media, how we feel is, in fact, often wrong. Just because we feel a certain way doesn’t mean it is the truth (just our truth, and sometimes, once we have had a chance to “cool down,” not even that). We don’t want to say things we don’t truly mean or aren’t truth. Doing so undermines our relationship with teammates and our chances of success with them. Instead, communicate that you fear that if you were to respond immediately, you might say something you don’t mean (although you might feel it at the moment). Second, instead of listening to respond, listen to understand (See [Letter on Leadership #82 – The Good Life](#)). When in an emotionally charged conversation, listen to understand and ask your teammate a question about what they just said to you. This will not only help you to be more emotionally resilient but also help your teammate to be the same.

Everything we do in life is done as a member of a team. There are numerous reasons why teams fail. Don’t let a lack of emotional resilience be one of them. This won’t be easy. The attainment of worthwhile things rarely is. If your teammates and the relationships you have with them are valuable to you, though, it’s time to get tough. It is time to get in touch with your emotions. Just not be driven by them...

Attack!

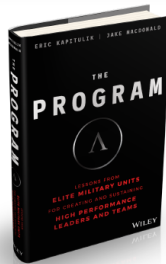


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