

## **Crawling Under Their Skin: The Value of Emotional Common Sense**

*By Sue Pivetta*

How often have you heard that Generation X cannot think—that there is no common sense? People hired into our comm centers are not “like they used to be, they have no common sense.” There is a large movement to value “emotional intellect” in the workplace and this trait is closely tied to common sense. This article explores the connection between (internal) common sense, and emotional intellect. Consider this an expansion on a common perception of what type of person is best for the work of 9-1-1.

This work is about people, crawling under their skin and looking out their eyes. Why? To make decisions on their behalf, to teach, motivate, save, direct, and catch people. To be emotionally intelligent means you are willing to explore the origin and soundness of your own thoughts, beliefs and emotions. We can't fake emotional connection to others—as we are generally emotionally transparent—even over the phone. Emotional intellect traits are valuable assets for managers, supervisors or trainers in that an emotionally intelligent person releases rigidity in dealing with self and others. So, in listing these traits, it's possible to identify people in your work arena who are well suited to this unique work. Following are six traits of an emotionally intellectual person.

**Humility in Thought.** Knowing the limits of your knowledge. Sensitivity to self-bias, prejudice and limitations of your own viewpoint. Thought humility depends on recognizing that you should not claim to know more than you actually know. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations (or lack of such foundations) of your beliefs. In other words, being able to challenge your own beliefs and accept new ideas.

For example: Hiring or promoting? What needs to be learned and unlearned, and more importantly, does the candidate exhibit humility in thought, not professing to understand?

**Intellectual Courage.** Having an awareness of the need to face (and tackle) ideas, beliefs or viewpoints toward which we have strong negative emotions but have ignored. This courage is about those beliefs others may consider absurd but that you feel are justified (in whole or in part). To determine for ourselves which is which, we must not passively and uncritically "accept" what we have "learned." You've seen the bumper sticker that says “Challenge Authority”—this is true for your own thinking and that of your group, although the penalties for non-conformity can be nasty.

For example: **Lights off/lights on?** Whatever the popular belief is, embracing a differing opinion may feel dangerous. There are many such myths or beliefs not based in fact that, if challenged, would demand courage of the challenger.

**Intellectual Empathy.** Having a consciousness of the need to imaginatively put oneself in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them (letting go of long-standing beliefs or labeling). Can you crawl under their skin? Can you remember a time when you weren't right, but felt you were? So then can you allow another to be wrong?

For example: Imagine a person who has a distorted perception of another. Defending only brings an end to the discussion. Allowing and observing will allow the dam of anger to break and may create a space for more rational dialogue.

**Intellectual Integrity.** Recognition of the need to be true to your own thinking; to hold yourself to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof to which you hold your antagonists. Practice what you preach. Admit honestly discrepancies and inconsistencies in your own thought and action.

For example: Demanding timeliness but showing up late, then admitting this was not consistent with what you demand from others.

**Intellectual Perseverance.** Realizing the need to hang in there, despite challenges, obstacles, or opposition. Being okay to have confusion about issues or long standing troubles, while not giving up and becoming apathetic.

For example: For years, this profession has struggled to gain parity with the other responders—it's a slow process. Perseverance used with intellectual insights may unburden the stress of continued inequity. Okay, it isn't happening as fast as I wanted, but I don't become disheartened and give in.

**Faith in Reason.** Believing that most people can reason, and giving others the opportunity *to* reason. You do this by encouraging people to come to their own conclusions. With proper encouragement and cultivation, people can learn to think for themselves, to form rational viewpoints, draw reasonable conclusions, think coherently and logically, persuade each other by reason and become reasonable persons (whew). Despite the evidence of the negative impressions we have of one another, the theory that all people are good (some with distorted fears, but ultimately good) persists.

For example: In crisis intervention the specialist does not need to 'fix' the person, but allow space for the person to use reason in a safe environment. What a relief for call takers when they know they can simply apply intervention techniques and not fix a mess.

## **Conclusion**

Common sense is the ability to reason correctly when reasoning is needed—using good judgment in making decision. Now apply this to using good 'emotional' judgment. People who have high emotional intellect are those that can connect with others, can be flexible and open to new ideas. Some of the ways you can use this information are in selection of employees and in promotions. Offer the candidate a chance to use empathy by offering scenarios and observe if they attempt to understand the other's point of view. Offer the candidate an opportunity to

challenge their own belief and observe if they can entertain another viewpoint. Ask them to explain a time when they were a hypocrite, understanding that we all are but that the emotionally intelligent person will admit it. For example, you may ask me if I feel strongly that this information is valid. Am I right in this theory? Since I strive to maintain humility, I can say that I have reasoned this to be true, but I am open to your input. But be careful if you disagree (or agree) with me, I may have already changed my mind!

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