



## Using emotions to make the learning stick.

### Key Learning Points

- Strong emotions play an important part in learning and memory
- Positive emotions are a great way to encourage learning
- Positive emotions, particularly laughter, are wonderful stress reducers
- Engaging delegates' emotions can add a powerful convincer to factual learning
- Acknowledge the whole range of emotions
- Keep your own emotional antennae on high alert

Why would you want to use emotions in a training course? Are emotions in the business environment appropriate? The growing trend towards considering emotional intelligence as a key factor in success may indicate that emotions, properly used, are a perfectly appropriate tool in business. And if we can use them in other areas of business, then surely learning and development will benefit too.

Imagine that you've just been offered a pay rise, the boss is considering you for promotion, it's a sunny day, you've got your favourite outfit on, your journey in was a dream and you're arriving at a course that you've been wanting to go on for ages. And, you've just found out your best friend is attending too! How do you feel? How much do you think you'll learn today?

Not everyone arrives at a course in such a good mood – there are all sorts of factors that we as trainers can have no control over before a delegate arrives to spend time with us. However, we can work hard to engage positive emotions and to minimise the stress that the outside world places upon people, so that once in the learning environment they can maximise the time they spend there. This makes sense for the individual, for their companies who invest considerable expense in sending them and their colleagues who are losing their time for the duration of the course.

Research shows that our mechanisms for learning and memory are activated most strongly when our bodies are in a state of heightened emotional awareness. It is true that we vividly remember things when we are frightened, scared or upset which is necessary for our survival. Fortunately for trainers and delegates, our survival instincts are also tuned in to ensuring we remember when we are happy, relaxed and enjoying ourselves.

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### **Use your antennae**

Don't plan to manipulate your delegates' emotions, merely provide a relaxed environment so they can express them appropriately. Sometimes we have to address less positive emotions that occur despite our best efforts. It may be that there is a particular issue and it is possible this is not a good day for learning for that delegate. However, it can be useful to address real issues and experiences with delegates that do generate real emotions. It is important to be careful and considerate if asking people about real life issues, and to be aware that some people are more comfortable with disclosure than others.

### **Our Brains**

Our brains and bodies are designed to make us notice when something important happens – when we get a surprise or something unusual happens we release hormones like adrenalin and endorphins which cause arousal. There is little difference in the physical effects of fear and excitement but the brain creates a label that makes us move towards or away from that stimulus again. It may be the physical changes in the body that signal the brain that something important has just happened so we need to remember it.

The hippocampus is associated with memory and sits closely to and has strong links with the limbic system which reacts quickly and instinctively – emotionally – to a stimulus.

We will probably recall pleasurable things frequently, and the current view of memory is that repeated use of these pathways builds up strong patterns and strengthens particular memories.

Whatever else the research shows it seems that by stimulating and encouraging positive emotions we can ensure that learning is more memorable in both the short and long term.

However, it is worth noting that very high levels of arousal can inhibit performance - it is important to get the balance right.

### **Laughter and smiling**

Laughter stimulates stress-relieving hormones - so encourage laughter at the beginning of a course when people may be apprehensive.

There has long been a debate as to whether emotional or physiological changes come first – do you smile because you feel happy? – or do you feel happy because you are smiling?

There is no clear picture as to which happens first but it is acknowledged that you can make yourself feel better by acting as if you are happy. And if you feel good you are more likely to remember what you are learning.

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## **Movement**

The release of hormones affects our emotions. Endorphins, the 'natural opiates', are released when we exercise and when we are happy, so if you begin a course with a few minutes of physical activity people will start in a more resourceful state. In New Zealand schools begin each morning with 15 minutes of 'physical jerks', 'music and movement' (call it what you like) to get all the children into a good learning state. It increases the flow of oxygen to the brain and releases endorphins – it also gives those activists in the group something to do immediately.

## **Curiosity killed the cat!**

And it also makes delegates try to find out what's happening rather than sitting in a passive state. Have you ever heard someone else telling secrets? How hard are you prepared to work to find out what they are talking about? By generating curiosity you encourage questioning (either overt or internal) and get delegates to want to find out what it is they need to know. Beware of setting up questions that learners aren't getting an answer to because this may distract them from the current topic. If a question is asked and it's not appropriate to talk about it now, explain that you will discuss it later and ask the questioner to write down or memorise the question. Or create a flipchart 'parking lot' for questions to be answered later.

## **Case study:**

We ran an evening session recently on Accelerated Learning and IT. A number of delegates admitted to arriving tired and weary after a long day, not particularly open to learning. However, whilst having refreshments, they noticed that all the way across the floor was a strange-looking pattern, there was a wet suit hanging from the flip chart stand – and was that a pink hoop sticking out from under the table? They suddenly felt curious rather than drained and wanted the session to start in order to find out what these things were doing there. (Admittedly there was a small amount of apprehension about the hoop but it was soon allayed when they found they weren't going to have to swirl it around their hips.)

## **Music**

Music affects our limbic systems and can be very useful to help anchor or recall learning. Be careful because music may have a stronger resonance for some people – you never know when you've just chosen 'Our Tune'. Generally, choose music in a major key as this has a more positive emotional effect than that in a minor key. It may be appropriate to choose music that has particular significance for a group – often music used in adverts can provoke a specific response. Again check people's reactions: for example, the Nutcracker Suite reminds me of an old Cadbury's Fruit

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and Nut advert and makes me smile - but one delegate told us it irritated her because it reminded her of endless ballet lessons when she was small.

### **Comfort/ Relaxation**

People who are relaxed and alert are in an optimal state for learning – remember too much arousal can inhibit performance. After lunch can seem like a hard time to gain attention as people often want to sleep off their lunch - so try to influence the catering so that it is light and nourishing. Consider telling a story or doing a relaxation exercise after lunch rather than fighting against the inevitable. Then get them up and encourage them to get involved in something active.

### **Negative Emotions**

Whilst all emotions are strongly linked with memory, it is possible that we may actively suppress memories associated with negative emotions - so inducing fear, anger, sadness in our delegates may not help. It is beneficial for us as trainers if people leave filling in a happy sheet rather than an unhappy sheet. People may remember what we taught them but they are unlikely to recommend the experience to their colleagues.

Don't compete with negative emotions. If a delegate has arrived feeling miserable don't expect them to leap in and start having fun. Acknowledge they are feeling flat and begin to lead them away from it if possible. They may be able to move into a more positive mode – if they can't then talk to them separately from the group. You may not be able to do anything other than acknowledge the situation.

### **Display of emotions**

Be aware that not all of us wear our hearts on our sleeves. Some people may be feeling emotions that are less obvious to observers – issues of cultural diversity may be important here. It is not beneficial to spend the entire time in a completely heightened emotional state – changes of emotions and time being 'quiet' will help learning too.

### **Watch out! Humour**

Do you use humour on your training courses? Or fun? Or jokes? Humour is very subjective and it is easy to get it wrong – we're not all stand-up comedians and it is possible to inadvertently cause offence. Introducing fun and laughter, especially if generated by the delegates, can be really helpful but keep a sensitive antenna tuned – sometimes an appropriate joke may be useful but keep an eye on other peoples' reactions. If it's likely to cause offence then stop it.



### **Did you know?**

It has been shown that when people are feeling positive and have to learn something they make better perceptual maps of the task than when no emotions or negative emotions are aroused.

### **Emotions as a convincer**

The logical part of our brain can accept something and learn it but we are not convinced until the limbic system verifies it for us. If we engage that part of our brain via the emotion in learning, it is much more likely to help the brain really 'know that it knows'. Activities that celebrate learning, such as an active review or the round of applause at the end of a course, may be more than just nice endings – they let us 'feel' that we know something.

### **Top Tip**

I like to think of running a course in the same way that one runs a party. Send invitations, be well prepared. When delegates arrive greet each one as if they are your special guest, introduce yourself, ensure they have refreshments, know where to sit, where to hang their coats and where the facilities are. Make them feel welcomed and comfortable. As with children's parties, there will be some delegates who want to get straight into the party games and others who hang back. Encourage those people to participate without making them feel uncomfortable - Challenge by Choice is a philosophy often used in the outdoors training environment that can be applied equally anywhere. Encourage delegates to join in, participate and get the most from their learning, whilst being considerate of their feelings and emotions.

### **Curious examples**

- A colleague sent every delegate a £10 note in their joining pack and instructions to buy a cushion that would best describe their personality – much more intriguing than knowing you're going to have to sit around doing the inevitable introductions.
- Another colleague sometimes sends out joining instructions as a message in a bottle.

### **What sorts of emotions do you want to encourage?**

Curiosity, interest, relaxation, fun, active participation, reflection, excitement, willingness to participate, challenge, passion.

### **What do we want less of?**

Fear, boredom, pain, sadness, over-excitement, aggression, jealousy, rage, stress.

What other emotions might you add to these lists?

**References:** The Learning Brain – Eric Jensen isbn 096378322x

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