

Emotional Intelligence and Diversity Series

Self-Governance: Managing Your Emotions So They Don't Sabotage You

Jorge Cherbosque, Ph.D.

Lee Gardenswartz, Ph.D.

Anita Rowe, Ph.D.

Contrary to the old saying, “What you don't know won't hurt you,” what you don't know and don't manage can hurt you when it comes to your emotional reactions. The understanding you gained in Affirmative Introspection of why you react to differences is just a first step in helping yourself deal effectively with the feelings that emerge. Once you know what bothers you and why, you then need to be able to direct the energy of your emotional response in a way that is constructive. It is the Emotional Intelligence and Diversity competence of **Self-Governance** that helps you manage your emotions in the face of ambiguity and change that are often part of the challenge involved in dealing with diversity. It also involves taking charge of your self-talk, the internal messages that are often defeating and negative when we are faced with differences.

What emotions are triggered for you when ...

- You can't make yourself understood because no one speaks your language(s)?
- People discount you because of your ethnicity, age or gender?
- Someone makes incorrect assumptions about you based on stereotypes?
- You perceive that someone has been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, accent or appearance?

Do you feel irritation, frustration, confusion, anger or rage? Chances are you had some feeling reactions to each of these situations. If you have had any of these experiences they probably touched some of your most sacred values and they put you in a situation where you had to deal with uncertainty about how to manage the incident and the reactions of others. A basic human need is to keep ourselves safe, both physically and emotionally. To do that, we need to have a sense that we can control situations and have the approval of others. Yet dealing with differences often shakes one or both of these two pillars of safety. It is often the feeling of being out of control and unable to gain the approval of others that leads us to react emotionally. You may have feelings of frustration that you can't get the clerk to understand what you want; hurt at being discounted; disgust at being stereotyped or rage at unfair treatment. Each of these reactions

is triggered by a sense of losing control or approval or, in some cases, both. Three competencies can help you manage these reactions: making ambiguity an ally, becoming a change master and getting in charge of your self-talk.

Making Ambiguity an Ally

Dealing with differences often puts us in new territory where the rules and expectations are unclear and confusion about situations and their consequences abounds. This is especially so in diverse environments where different values and beliefs often present choices between two rights or two undesirable choices, not a right and a wrong. Living with the uncertainty and lack of closure in ambiguous situations is unsettling, often triggering feelings of anxiety, fear and discomfort. One aspect of **Self-Governance** is the ability to manage this discomfort and, rather than look for a quick fix for the situation, sit with it long enough to work it through.

In your diverse world, what kinds of ambiguous situations are you dealing with where you are faced with a tough dilemma? Perhaps you want to confront a coworker about the stereotypic comments or ethnic jokes he is making, yet you want to maintain a harmonious relationship. Maybe you want to know more about dealing with a person that is different from you in physical ability or sexual orientation, yet you are reluctant to ask questions to learn more for fear of offending. Maybe you've felt excluded or unfairly treated yet you don't want to come off as a whiner and complainer. You may find someone's performance unsatisfactory yet you don't want to be accused of prejudice if you give feedback. Managing the discomfort of not knowing clearly what to do starts with identifying the different and conflicting needs and values in the situation and making peace with not having an answer right away.

Being Your Own Change Master

Another aspect of diversity that often triggers emotions is change. Feelings emerge when demographic shifts bring us into contact with new groups, when other generations exhibit values and behaviors that we are not used to and when cultural and language differences block communication or require us to shift our responses. Managing our reactions to changes such as these by understanding the threat we perceive in them and by seeing, not just the losses but the gains they bring, are key steps in becoming your own change master.

What changes has diversity brought into your life which have triggered strong feelings in you? Is it that your neighborhood now has signs in languages you can't read? Is it the requirement to learn about other cultures so you can work more effectively with customers,

students or patients? Being a change master means identifying both the losses and the gains in these changes so you can move to acceptance and find constructive responses.

Managing Your Self-Talk

Finally, **Self-Governance** requires that you recognize and manage your own self-talk, the internal dialogue that can sooth or scare, calm or enrage. When these mental messages are accurate and affirming, you manage your feelings in a healthy way. When they are negative and exaggerated, you “awfulize” the situation and make yourself feel powerless, causing emotions to get out of control. Telling yourself “It is a tough problem but I’m up to dealing with it because I’ve dealt with other issues as difficult,” is a more rational and affirming self-talk message than, “I’m not going to be able to handle it and I’ll look like a failure.” “I don’t have much experience with this group so I may make mistakes,” is more realistic than, “I should be able to handle this and know what to do.” Talking to yourself with less exaggerated, self-defeating messages gives you a chance to respond in more productive ways. For example, you can take steps to talk with those who are from a different group and ask them help you understand their culture rather than avoid them because of a fear of embarrassment.

What kind of self-talk messages are in your head when you deal with differences that are difficult, frustrating or confusing? Becoming aware of them is the first step. Then, challenging them when they are inaccurate, exaggerated or defeating is the second step. Getting rid of messages like “They’re doing this to me on purpose,” “I’ll be out of control,” or “Poor me,” will help you manage your emotions by getting in charge of your self-talk, avoiding a victim stance and putting you back in the driver’s seat. Replace them with realistic and positive messages such as “I’m up to the challenge,” “others have dealt with much worse situations.”

You will increase your competence in **Self-Governance** if you work on making ambiguity your ally rather than your enemy, becoming the master of change rather than its victim and taking charge of your self-talk so that it is affirming rather than alarming.

To find out more about Emotional Intelligence & Diversity, get the authors’ new book, *Emotional Intelligence for Managing Results in a Diverse World* (Davis-Black, 2008) and go to their website; www.EIDI-Results.org.