

There are no such thing as negative emotions

We usually differentiate between positive and negative emotions: Joy or enthusiasm versus fear or anger. Does this distinction make sense? Are «negative» emotions bad and should we try to avoid them? Many people see themselves as above anger, envy or jealousy. But if these emotions were useless, they would hardly have survived evolution.

Peter Näf

A client of mine had a caretaker in the facility management department who was performing unsatisfactorily. As his former superior had tolerated this for years, he felt secure in his position. My client had several conversations with him and complained about his performance - with no success. He became increasingly angry with his employee and blamed himself for it. I could understand his anger and was amazed that he showed little understanding for himself.

Recognising emotions and working with them

When I asked him what he expected of himself in this situation, he replied: «I should be able to explain my point of view to the employee in an understandable way». He obviously attributed the failure in the discussions to a communicative weakness on his part. When we worked together, he expressed himself clearly and the way he communicated his concerns to his employee was understandable to me.

For me, anger is like a little man on my shoulder who shouts in my ear when I overlook something important. Looking at this picture, my client realised that he felt disrespected as a supervisor because his employee was letting him run into the void. He could not reconcile his emotional reaction with his self-image of a person who is

always balanced. The interaction also contradicted his idea that all differences of opinion could be resolved by mutual agreement through communication.

We then dealt with the goal of anger to protect our personal space - physically or metaphorically - when we do not recognise the need for it with our intellect.

Practise emotion management

We can learn how to deal with our own and other people's emotions by decoding their language. In doing so, we would do well to recognise the «small» emotions too: During the first conversation with his employee, my customer probably felt angry about the employee's behaviour. He could have easily addressed this. Over time, the anger about the behaviour developed into rage at the person. This could only be dealt with professional help.

Just as my client created something positive from «negative» emotions - taking his needs seriously - «positive» feelings often produce negative things: out of sheer enthusiasm, we make an ill-considered purchase decision that burdens us financially or we blurt out things in a relaxed mood that we would have been better off keeping to ourselves.

Emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are neither positive nor negative - they are neutral signposts that navigate us through life if we read them correctly.

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