

# Applying EQ through Process Framing

*An Article by Derek Hendrikz © 2005*

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Emotional Intelligence or EQ has become increasingly important in the workplace. Organisations are slowly realising that dysfunctional dynamics could cost them millions. This is so since the inability to manage emotion results in decrease of organizational energy. At the end of the day any corporation is fuelled through human energy, a vital component for growth and expansion.

The crucial question remains – how does one apply emotional intelligence in the workplace? One effective technique is process framing. This technique allows the manager to apply containment, reframing, processing and empowerment as integrated skills to work with human emotion in the workplace.

Let's have a closer look at the steps.

## **Containment:**

This entails that, as figure of authority, you are prepared to take emotion, without resistance, and work with it for a while. The greatest threat of effective containment is probably the vulnerability of any manager to be contaminated by the individual's issues. Think of a manager having tea with some subordinates. Suddenly a subordinate colleague makes a joke regarding another employee. The manager laughs, and with this laugh subconsciously indicates his/her identification with the connotation projected by the joke. How will this manager now later effectively (and legitimately) contain issues of interpersonal conflict amongst subordinate colleagues? It's simply not possible.

One of the most important skills involved with effective containment is self-knowledge. A black subordinate colleague might complain to a black manager about issues of racism. This black manager has also been discriminated against many times. His/her inability to separate his/her own issues from the complaining individual's issues might cause him/her to see this issue as a golden opportunity for advancing his/her own crusade. S/he is thus not containing the claiming individual's issue of discrimination, but rather using the individual to deal with his/her own unfinished business.

## **Reframing:**

People who struggle with interpersonal or intrapersonal issues usually do it from an emotional frame. This often results in the issues being full of distortions, deletions and generalizations. It's the manager's responsibility to help the employee frame his/her issues correctly. An employee could make the remark that all men in this department are obnoxious pigs. The manager can then ask the question 'all men?' This could help the employee to frame her opinion more correctly.

**Processing:**

This is where strong facilitation skills come handy. Processing mostly entails deep listening, in order to understand the emotion that the individual is working with. The greatest danger in processing emotional issues is that many managers only try to understand the issues on content level. In order to really get to the bottom of things the manager needs to understand both content and emotion surrounding the issue. Understanding that sexist remarks are made towards women employees is not enough, the manager needs to grasp the anger, frustration and other emotions that such diversity issues bring about. By allowing a person to help you understand both the content and emotion of their issue, will create psychological space for them to deal with this. It will also prepare them to own up this issue and deal with it themselves.

**Empowerment:**

This is the step where you empower a person to own up and work with his/her own issues. This is also the most sensitive step of all. A manager, who does not know when a person is ready to take back their issue, can easily worsen the situation. The skill lies in knowing when a person is ready to own up his or her issue. This is made possible through adequate processing of the issue. If enough time is spent on the processing of such an issue, the manager should be able to see enough signs of an individual being ready to take back and deal with their own issues.



**Example:**

The following simple example should help you understand the management of emotion through containment, reframing, processing, and empowerment. In the example a black male employee by the name of Sipho complains to an Indian female manager, named Jenna about issues of racism at the workplace.

**Sipho:** Miss Jenna I've made this appointment to speak to you about the discrimination, taking place at our workplace.

**Jenna:** Would you like to sit down and talk about this? (Jenna now shows that she is prepared to contain this issue. It would be good if she uses the time to consciously separate her issues from Sipho's. She might say to herself. 'I'm not dealing with my issues regarding discrimination, but with Sipho's')

**Sipho:** Thank you. The issue I'm referring to here is the accusation by the white employees that the cups in the tearoom are being stolen.

**Jenna:** All the white employees are complaining? (The processing starts. With this question she helps Siphon to frame his issue correctly)

**Siphon:** No, the one complaining is Hendrik, but we know that he is the mouthpiece to the whites.

**Jenna:** In which way do you feel are Hendrik and his friends discriminating against you? (Again she helps Siphon frame his issue correctly)

**Siphon:** Well I'm the one working with the tea, and I'm in charge of the cups. I thus know that they are implying me in this matter.

**Jenna:** Have they accused you specifically? (Still helping him to frame his issue)

**Siphon:** No, but being black, I know that whites automatically see us as thieves. They've already judged me, just because I'm a black man.

**Jenna:** What I hear is that you feel discriminated against. I also get the feeling that you are frustrated to be in this position, and that this feeling you have has a long history. (Jenna has now left the issue of the cups and is helping Siphon deal with his issues of diversity. By trying to understand both the content and the emotion regarding Siphon's issues gives him the psychological space to consciously deal with it. This processing can take a while, and Jenna will have to contain it long enough until there is evidence that Siphon is ready to own up, and work with his own issues.)

*The process can now continue for a while. Jenna will now facilitate a process whereby Siphon can frame and process his issue to a point where he can own it up totally. She becomes a soundboard and a mirror, but never giving advice or taking responsibility for Siphon's issues.*

**Jenna:** Siphon it seems to me that there are two issues here. The one has to do with teacups, and the control over it. To me this is an easy issue, since together we can work out a system where more control is exercised over the cups. The second issue seems more difficult to deal with since it is about your experience of being a black man, and your perceptions of how white people relate to you. How do you think you will be able to work with this problem? (Jenna is now starting to give back Siphon's issue, and she will carefully listen to his response since it will indicate his readiness to deal with this issue by himself.)

**Siphon:** I think that you should call in the whites and talk to them. Tell them that they should not see all blacks as thieves. (Siphon tries to make this issue the managers responsibility, and does not yet own up).

**Jenna:** If I do this will it take away the frustration and other emotions that you experience in terms of black/white relationships?

*The conversation can now move in a direction that will help Sipho deal with his own issues regarding diversity. The only solution to dealing with issues involving emotion is an inside-out approach. Start with the self, and mostly there will be no need to go anywhere else.*

*Although this is a simple example, and as managers you probably need do deal with much more complex emotion related issues, we can nevertheless learn from this example. Following are some learning points:*

#### **How would the 'average' manager deal with this situation?**

- There would be a much larger focus on the teacups. Once the teacup disappearance issue has been sorted out the manager would be satisfied.
- The whole process would be much shorter. The 'average' manager thrives on quick fixes; s/he is prepared to trade off short-term benefits for long-term dis-benefits.
- The 'average' manager would give a quick solution and offer more advice, thus taking responsibility for Sipho's issue. By facilitating a process whereby Sipho can find his own answers the manager will be empowering both Sipho and him/herself. On the other hand the 'busy' manager who quickly sorts out Sipho's problems will not only be dis-empowering both Sipho and him/herself but would also be creating future problems. The time saved on this issue will eventually be claimed back with interest.

#### **What are the problems relating to this approach?**

- It takes time. Busy managers will simply say that there is no time for this touchy feely stuff. Unfortunately, the truth is that when not dealing with this touchy feely stuff, they tend to grow into monsters that could cause a lot of damage. 99% of managers spend 99% of their time trying to avoid difficult issues by providing quick fixes.
- You will get resistance. Most people do not want to own up and deal with their issues. They also do not want you, the manager, to facilitate a process that will empower them to own it up and deal with it. Instead they want you to take their side and punish the 'perpetrators'. Unfortunately by doing this you could only be adding petrol to an already burning fire.
- It takes practice. Managing emotion in this way is not easy, it takes a lot of practice and discipline. But the personal growth involved might just be extremely rewarding.
- It requires a great deal of introspection. The manager should know and understand his/her own issues relating to the problem that he/she is dealing with.

### What are the benefits of this approach?

- It has a long-term focus. Managers will empower their organizations to effectively deal with future transformation and change.
- The outcome of this approach is empowerment. The employee will learn that the manager is not an all-powerful godlike figure that knows everything. Instead the employee will learn that he/she has power within him/herself to adequately deal with own issues.
- The approach enhances self-development. With this approach emotion is not tolerated, instead it is celebrated. By containing, reframing, processing and giving back the manager shows that it's OK to have feelings. The manager gives the message of 'I am available as a facility that you can use to grow and empower yourself.

How do I manage emotion? As you can see this article offers no easy answers. The journey of finding the power of EQ belongs to you.

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