

# 7 Reasons Why Emotional Leaders Are the Future

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Emotional, sensitive, intuitive leaders will be vital to any organization that hopes to achieve success in the next decade.



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Lisa Kimmel assumed she could keep it together for her virtual town hall. It was April of 2020, one month into the whirling funhouse of horrors that would become the COVID-19 pandemic. Kimmel—Edelman’s chair and CEO of Canada & Latin America—was addressing 250 of her Canadian employees about how they were adjusting to the wrenching changes in their work and home lives. As she set up, she wrote in the *Toronto Star*, she felt calm and ready.

Then, unexpectedly, the feels hit her like a wave. “As I was speaking to my team, I was overcome with emotion,” she wrote. “My voice wavered and the tears came—not what I had planned, but there was no stopping it.” She was embarrassed, but within seconds of her outburst, her team flooded her computer with an outpouring of love and support that she said later helped her build trust with her team during a challenging, disruptive year.

According to conventional wisdom and leadership stereotypes (we all know how accurate and helpful those are), leaders aren’t supposed to show emotion. Strong leaders are stern and stoic, making rational decisions based on the cold-blooded math of profit and loss, head count, and

quarterly earnings. In other words, effective leaders reflect the hyper-masculine 1950s dad stereotype: the clenched-jaw worker who handed down discipline with his belt, rarely smiled, and—sure as John Wayne—never, ever shed a tear.

This just in: This isn't the 1950s. We're just starting to emerge from pestilentem annum, an ink-black year (or two) of isolation, and we've all got some anxiety, angst, or loneliness to get off our chests—including the folks residing in the C-suite. Oh, and leaders aren't all men anymore. According to Catalyst, in 2021 women occupied 31% of senior management positions around the world, the highest number to date.

So, can we consign this "leaders aren't allowed to have feelings" nonsense to the same cultural shredder as day planners, that photo of Bernie Sanders and his mittens, and casual workplace sexual harassment? Pretty please?

Still, we get it. Emotions get a bad rap. In our book, *Rare Breed: A Guide to Success for the Defiant, Dangerous, and Different*, we write about seven so-called vices we call "virtues" that many people still criticize. Of them, emotional is the least understood. Perhaps that's because it's the most encompassing. We define emotional as having a high EQ and great powers of intuition and empathy, all assets for any leader who has to manage people—which is to say, every leader.

But particularly in the business world, "emotional" is often a pejorative. You're seen as volatile, prone to unpredictable outbursts. Or you're hypersensitive, leading people to walk on eggshells around you and duck and cover after offering even mild criticism. Or you're irrational and wimpy, incapable of making tough calls because you're busy rescuing cats from trees.

Intimidated by these common beliefs, some "emotional" leaders end up suppressing that side of themselves and not showing up as who they really are. This is especially true for women, who wind up overcompensating for fear of being seen as weak and incapable because our feelings are in control. "For female leaders especially, this kind of vulnerability can be terrifying," Kimmel writes. "It's ingrained in so many of us to be cool and collected, to project strength and calm, or risk looking incompetent."

But while we certainly do know some emotional leaders who fit those negative stereotypes, they're exceedingly rare. In fact, in today's world, sensitive leaders who are open about their emotions are an asset. Before COVID-19, a Verizon survey of 1,700 senior business leaders found that fewer than 20% said emotional intelligence would be vital for future business leaders. Post COVID-19, 69% of business leaders said EQ would be essential. Times are changing.

Here are seven reasons why emotional, sensitive, intuitive leaders will be vital to any organization that hopes to achieve success in the next decade.

### **REASON #1: EMPLOYEES HAVE BEEN THROUGH A LOT.**

Since March of 2020, employees of most companies, large and small, have had to manage working from home, often in tiny spaces, often with children running around. They've had their private space invaded, learned how to manage Zoom, been unable to see friends and loved ones, and lived in fear.

In other words, it's been a frightening, stressful time for millions. They've gained weight, changed their sleep habits, been afflicted with increased levels of depression and anxiety, and had their home lives turned upside down. They deserve leaders who understand and empathize with what they've endured. If they can't find them, they'll use the reopening of economies to go elsewhere.

### **REASON #2: SO HAVE CUSTOMERS.**

See above. For the members of the general public, the COVID-19 experience was no less harrowing than it was for corporate employees. Many had been laid off. Children had to attend school on screens and miss out on some of the most important developmental years of their lives.

We won't belabor the point. We've all come to expect everyone to be a little more patient, forgiving, and kind as we sift through the rubble and try to reengage: banks, lenders, airlines, schools, governments, even the Internal Revenue Service. Companies that fail to respect this new normal will alienate customers and market share. On the other hand, those with leaders who can connect with customers will earn unprecedented levels of loyalty, even love.

### **REASON #3: ZOOM HAS SHATTERED THE SEAMLESS C-SUITE FACADE.**

In the past, CEOs and other senior executives were as distant as the faces on Mount Rushmore; people who provoked envy, fear, and awe, carefully coiffed brands in Tom Ford suits. It was easy for those people to pretend they didn't have feelings, or any other human weakness.

No one is buying the act anymore. We've seen your home office and your deck on Zoom, and while they're swank, we've also seen you in your workout shorts and your morning stubble. We've seen your sink piled with dishes, heard your teenager swearing at Instagram, and watched your cat step in front of the screen and stamp its paws all over your T-shirt. You're no longer the Wizard of Oz; there is no curtain.

The good news is, you can drop the façade now. We know you're as bumbling, disorganized, and awkward as the rest of us—and you know what? We actually like you more because of it. So, you can also quit pretending you didn't bawl like a baby at the end of *The Good Place* . . . because you know you did.

### **REASON #4: FEMALE CEOs ARE RISING.**

We are not saying that women are naturally more emotional than men. We are saying that women tend to show their emotions in the workplace more than men, and in this post-COVID-19 world, women executives are on the climb. According to CNBC, in the first quarter of 2021, 41 women led Fortune 500 companies. That 8.2% might seem paltry, but in 2018 there were just 24 women at the top spot—a 71% increase in three years.

More women at the helm of more companies suggests a lot of potential downstream effects, and we're betting one of them is that in female-led organizations, more employees will feel safer expressing their emotions, for better or worse. As a result, corporate cultures will change. Brands will evolve and differentiate themselves from their competition by how warm, welcoming, authentic, and empathetic they are.

## **REASON #5: THE ARC OF HISTORY BENDS TOWARD JUSTICE.**

Black Lives Matter. Climate change. Childhood poverty. Roe v. Wade. The immigration crisis. Whatever your politics, you can't deny that more and more people are getting involved in solving the great problems of our time. They're informed. They're passionate. They care deeply about social justice, equity, and fairness—and they expect the companies and brands they patronize to care about the same things.

That's difficult to pull off if your organization's default position is "profit before people." You can't fake compassion. Consumers are more sophisticated than ever, and they despise hypocrisy. What's more, so do your employees. If you're going to claim to care about solving systemic racism or ending the opioid crisis, you'd better genuinely care about those causes, deep down in your gut—because you'll find that everyone admires companies and leaders who sacrifice profit for what's right, and lead with their heart.

## **REASON #6: YOU'RE MORE EXPOSED THAN EVER.**

Before social media, if someone in the C-suite said or did something stupid or sexist, your PR firm could spin the story with the local press and the networks and prevent a lot of the damage. Well, those days are over. Now, let's say you're a U.S. airline whose name rhymes with "excited," and you just happen to have security drag a passenger kicking and screaming down the aisle for no reason. Before you can say, "PR crisis," you have a PR crisis that kicks your share price in the teeth and sparks boycott hashtags on Twitter.

In a transparent, instant-news, no-filter world, the only smart move for any organization is to be one of the good guys (either that or be too big to care—but there's only one Amazon, right?). Again, you can't fake that. Corporate social responsibility programs designed to burnish your brand in the press won't fool the Facebook and Instagram warriors. Better to drop the stoicism, be honest and direct, talk about what motivates you and your executive team, and find human connection with your market.

Have aging parents showing signs of dementia? So do some of your customers, and they want to know that you get their pain. Did you cry when you hugged your parents when vaccinations made it possible to see them after a year apart? So did millions of us, and we want to bond with you over that experience. Vulnerability is okay.

## **REASON #7: RETENTION WILL BE THE KEY BUSINESS ISSUE OF THE 2020S.**

Two economic meltdowns in 12 years? Millennials and Gen-Zers are furious, and we don't blame them. They're a lot less likely to trust any employer now, and a lot more likely to rely on freelance, side hustles, and the gig economy to make ends meet. That means retaining talented people will be the Ali-Foreman heavyweight fight of the next decade. Guess what connects with these workers? True, unguarded, authentic feeling. Caring about people. Caring about causes. Caring about the planet. Just caring, full stop. Build a high-EQ leader class with intuition and soul, and you stand a better chance of holding onto game-changing talent.

You're leading people. People want and need to feel that you hear them, understand them, and see them as part of your culture, your band of sisters and brothers.