

# Coaching Big Emotions

*“When you listen with empathy to another person, you give that person psychological air.”* Stephen R. Covey

*“When feelings are mentionable and manageable, it is a great service to mental health.”* Fred Rogers

In our society we’ve gotten all hung up on the management of conflict, hurt feelings and the steadily available vortex of doom in the media and online. We spend a lot of energy reacting, avoiding, containing, blaming, getting partisan, scaring each other, feeling heated and helpless or ashamed and then usually exiting, getting quiet (or getting numb) instead of finding ways to do less catastrophizing and to be more connected and fruitful.

There are far more sophisticated biochemical explanations for the physical sensations and social consequences of all of this (I’ve listed a few of my favorite books below). But I think of emotion as having **two layers**. Both are useful in their own ways to our surviving and thriving; both are filled with somatic and social cues.

The **first layer** is instantly reactive and defensive. It’s our early-warning physical and biochemical reaction to real and perceived danger. Our ancestors were inspired by the first layer to be ready to instantly assess, *“Can I eat that?”* and *“Can that eat me?”* On the savannah, we didn’t have the thickest skin or the biggest teeth or scariest claws, but we did, like all mammals, develop instantaneous reactivity. After all, *“life has to win every day”* while *“death has to win just once.”* It makes sense that we see threats everywhere. We’ve been fighting, fleeing and freezing for millennia. Perpetual crisis can be automatic! It’s easy! And for some reason, we’re just as easily spooked and negative now as we ever were—even in these amazing days of health, freedom, prosperity and safety. We’ve got a *“negativity bias”* which can of course still protect us from lions, but it can also distort—and often become our easy and unexamined default. But when we slow down on the reactivity and discover that it’s not really a lion, we breathe differently and move from reactivity to choice. What if it’s really a pony?

And there’s a **second layer of emotion. It’s slower but just as adaptive.** Once we are secure enough to slow down and get to it, this layer helps us to connect and communicate, to be softer with each other and to create order. In the long run, the **second layer** became our species’ greatest advantage. The **second layer** includes what I call *“belonging-longing.”* And when we find consistent ways to inhabit the **second layer**, we get to connect and be courageous with challenges all at the same time. The **second layer** is where we can stand alone when we need to. The **second layer** is also where we can belong. The **second layer** is where we built civilizations that are not based simply on shared fears and hatreds. The **second layer** is where we are most alive.

Central to our work as coaches is growing clarity about our own two personal layers. What scares and annoys you? The most important thing is always what you will do next. The most obvious place for both layers to appear is with people we care about and work with.

## Picture this . . .

I’m sitting down with a leader and her team of very clever, very busy people. We’ve met together before and share some trust. But today it’s pretty quiet. I follow the energy and listen with my eyes to a roomful of **first layers**. Two people are staring at the floor and dodging eye contact. One guy wants to know if we’re going to get all *“woo-woo”* today. One woman is leaning back, arms folded, looking surly. Another is asking how long we’ll be meeting (she has important work to do). And another is getting all chirpy and asking who needs a seltzer. The leader is leaning in, looking in my direction. She knows that her team’s subject matter expertise is not the issue. Something else is getting in the way of their effectiveness. Everyone senses danger and their physical presence reflects it.

I check my own reaction. Each of them looks overwhelmed in their own way. Am I? I already know that my personal **first-layer** response to the danger is to try to charm people. That won't help much. **Nor will it help if I:**

- *Start delivering tools and tips, telling and fixing or if I*
- *Ask each of them for their analysis of the issues (and who they think is to blame). This is a paradox because their big brains are responsible for much of their success. Except that, as a team, they're stuck and their leading-edge ability to analyze doesn't seem to be helping*
- *It won't help if I tell the surly one to leave and come back when she can be nice at which time, I'll teach her some communication skills or if I*
- *Invite them to vent those powerful **first layers***

These people look sullen, reactive, angry, overwhelmed, helpless, hopeless and scared. Venting that stuff will only make it worse. It reminds me of how instantly angry I can get in traffic when another driver does something unpredictable. I may look furious in the moment, but the truth is, I'm scared. Then as soon as I see an out-of-state license plate and a grateful wave from a disoriented visitor, my amygdala calms down, I thank the **first-layer** reactivity for doing its job of preparing me to fight, fly or freeze. And, knowing I'm safe now, I'm back to my **second layer**, ready to return my attention to building civilization again.

Big emotion can sweep us all up.

I know (because they're mammals) that each member of this team wants to connect and belong, to be generous and receptive. If I can help them to explore and get some access to their **second layers**, I know already that I'll hear things like:

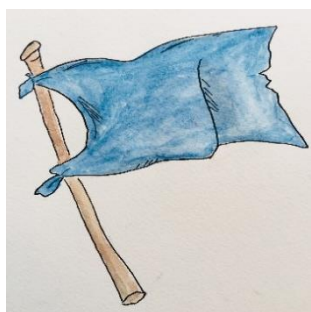
- *"I'm scared I won't do this right"*
- *"I'm not really indifferent, I'm just frozen"*
- *"I'm worried that I'll say the wrong thing"*
- *"I want you to trust that I'm trying"*
- *"This is foreign territory and I don't know what to expect"*
- *"Maybe I'll fall apart or sound crazy or get hurt forever"*

Each one—including the coach—comes with a story about (and good reasons for) their **first layer**.

## **Before I talk about what happened next . . .**

Put yourself in my seat. What would your story be as the coach in the room? What are the sensations you notice? What are you automatically saying to yourself? How are you coaching yourself? How will you be able to return your attention to these good people and to what they are offering you? For as long as you're a coach or coaching leader, you'll be getting better at paying attention in two directions: to your coachees of course, but also, to yourself. In your own reflective practices, self-awareness and emotional regulation, you will become fluent in moving between the automatic **first layer** to the chosen **second layer**.

Take a moment and reflect on the following question (which I've asked myself repeatedly through the years):



*“If a flag flew over the house you grew up in that announced to the world how your family dealt with big emotions (for example: rejection, sadness, conflict, grief, appreciation, attraction), what would have been written on it?”*

I’ve also asked hundreds of people this question and I’ve heard all kinds of answers:

- *“Be the boss. The person who stands up first wins.”*
- *“Get invisible. Keep it to yourself.”*
- *“Leave.”*
- *“Be silent and comply.”*
- *“Defend yourself.”*
- *“Yell. Get scary.”*
- *“Be silent. Get scary.”*
- *“Be perfect and blameless.”*
- *“Breathe. Smile and ask a question.”*
- *“Do something funny.”*
- *“Charm them.”*
- *“Call Grandma.”*
- *“Be extra nice and maybe hold hands.”*
- *“Get busy fixing.”*
- *“Don’t poke the bear.”*
- *“Be the peacemaker. Find common ground.”*
- *“Pout. Show everyone how hurt you are.”*
- *“Argue. Cite your source.”*

Those people who raised us usually got lots of things right. But when it comes to anger and resentment and shame and sadness and pain and loneliness and disagreeing and ambition and attraction and love, it’s pretty common for families to have their own incomplete intergenerational patterns and stuck places. Now, as a grown-up it’s pretty normal to find yourself responding in the same familiar (maybe **first layer**) way you always have. Habit has its own gravitational pull.

### For example . . .

What would your response be if a coachee said in your sixth session, *“I’m not getting much out of our conversations. Can I get a refund?”* **Here’s a hint:** Remember you are listening in two directions. Something historic in you probably gets bumped. Can you take a couple of breaths to coach yourself through “the automatic to the chosen”? And then can you return your attention to your coachee’s experience?

When this happened to me a few years ago, I had to breathe through an instant **first-layer** cloud of hurt and shame and what-can-I-do-to-make-it-right?! And then I asked my coachee, *“How does it usually go for you when you’re not getting what you want?”* Together, we challenged an old pattern and my coachee learned to speak up more for what he wanted, rather than just leave. He didn’t have to “be silent and comply and leave” this time.

Your growing capacity for staying gently curious and collaborative with both layers of big emotion is right at the heart of your coaching presence. Here's why. Psychologically and neurologically, when you get good at your own version of Level III, your calm and unhurried presence gives the human brains with whom you engage a chance to find a new path through an old and familiar experience. And to maybe plant a new flag.

## Back to my quiet, unhappy team . . .

I ask them to think about my flag question for a minute or two. Then I invite each person to tell a story and gradually we began to smile and laugh and become thoughtful together. I even catch glimpses of vulnerability. And bravery. We start to have a different experience. I stand beside them as they explore and name and get curious about each other's stories. They experience emotion as workable and even useful. They actually help each other out of that **first-layer vortex**.

## Here's what I do that helps as I invite them to tell their stories . . .

- I **slow down** (**first-layer** reactivity is fast and automatic and I want quiet amygdalas so that we could get to the unhurried **second layer—and to more trust**).
- I speak with **soft curiosity**. You can hold attention with your voice: *"Stay with me."*
- I keep things **simple and uncluttered**.
- I use their **words and stories**.
- I say what I see and hear (*"you just leaned in—seems like you don't want us to miss this"*).
- I help them to create order—to see that emotion isn't irrational. Both layers are full of information.
- I remind myself that their stuckness isn't due to their lack of expertise—it's due to their process.

## And then this happens . . .

**Me (taking a breath and smiling):** *"OK. Who's got a story?"*

**Surly woman (emphatically):** *"I'll start. Our flag would have read, 'Make yourself useful.' When things got tense at the dinner table, I got good at finding something to fix."*

**Me:** *"You're still good at finding things to fix!"*

**SW (smiling now):** *"Yes! And the bonus was that I could usually leave the drama at the table to go do it!"*

**Me:** *"So help me to see the picture: You're a normal kid. You just want to survive and belong. What early warning signals did you get physically that told you that things were getting dramatic?"*

**SW (getting quieter, beginning to use her second layer):** *"Hmm. I guess I'd start to hold my breath."*

**Me (slowing down):** *"What would that mean?"*

**SW:** *"I don't know. That I'd better figure out how to be useful and go do it!"*

**Me:** *"So you held your breath, you got mad/scared/sad, you said to yourself 'I'm going to go find something useful to do.' And you'd get to leave. Is that how it went?"*

**SW (slowing down):** *"Well yes."*

**Me:** *"This makes complete sense to me: As a kid you'd notice you were holding your breath as things got dramatic. That was your early-warning signal to leave the table and "be useful."*

**SW:** *"And it was a bonus that I could get away from everyone's drama and go be useful **alone!**"*

**A team member chimes in:** *"You're still good that too."*

*(Everyone laughs.)*

**Me:** *"Could you help me understand something else?"*

**SW:** *"OK."*

**Me:** *"As a kid, who had your back and helped you to breathe when things got dramatic?"*

**SW:** *(Shrugs)*

**Team leader:** *“Could I say something?”*  
**SW:** *(Rolls her eyes and smiles) “OK.”*  
**Team leader:** *“Well. I could have your back here.”*  
**SW:** *(Thoughtfully) “I’m not sure I know what that would look like.”*  
**Me:** *“Thanks for going first.”*

*(Surlly woman becomes visibly less surly and leans in to hear the next story. Trust was getting fast-tracked.)*

The team listens as each one tells a story and allows me and their team members to respond. I stand beside them as they have an experience, de-escalate, make it safe enough and find some order. They slow down and find that **second layer** that mammals love to live in. I walk around in it with them and help them to keep their balance in the unevenness and to help each other. My continuous self-coaching is crucial. I help them to experience the **second layer**. It’s life-giving. And as they get access to it, the ROI of this time seems clear.

Every day these people see and work with each other, and now they are giving each other a new experience, maybe even a way out of an historic **first layer** reaction that never really has worked very well. Who knew that so much personal growth and healing could happen at work?

### **It’s true that coaching isn’t therapy . . .**

We’re not diagnosing or prescribing or spending hours unraveling old hurt places or billing insurance companies. As coaches we will invite people to glance at their historic patterns, stories and strengths, but our gaze always returns to the present and the future. However, as with a great therapeutic relationship, a great coaching partnership touches our hearts and motivations and sense of purpose in the world in some deep ways. It’s equally poignant. And when a coach invites, respects, engages with and explores a coachee’s emotional wisdom—without attachment to being right or fixing--the possibilities increase for the coachee’s clear and sustainable movement through the stages of change.

Do you remember in the Key Skills when we talked about **using the bright spots and defining stories of the person or team you’re coaching?** We’ve all got defining stories and historic patterns about how we first learned to survive and belong. Usually, those defining stories emerged as we paid attention to our reactive **first layers**. When a coach understands the power of slowing down, of being softly curious and of speaking simply, they can invite their coachees to glance back at their defining stories and then to move their gaze to the present, and to the reality they want to create going forward as they explore and use their **second layer** with people they care about and work with. It can be poignant.

### **As I drive away from the team meeting . . .**

I get in the slow lane and do a little self-coaching. I’ve been ON for several hours and great things have happened. Now I pay attention to my own thoughts and to my own breathing. I think about what I need to reflect on as I head home or to my next coaching interaction. The people in both places need me to be present, accessible and responsive.

And I need me to be present! This is a big part of the deal—If I don’t attend to my own practices of reflection and self-care and to staying connected to my own colleagues, I’ll set myself up for resentment, diminished effectiveness and maybe even burn-out.

At the core of coaching presence is your ability to tolerate, even welcoming and using, big emotions—both your own and those of the people you coach. So where are you with emotion? In your **first layer**, what scares you? What sends you into Level I listening?

Is it the message on your old flag?

Or is it a cause or something deep in your own experience or convictions? Maybe it's political or personal or something that's a raw place somewhere in your own healing. Maybe it's an issue with which you see no gray area. Coaches, like good reporters, cannot fairly make their work about those things.

Years ago, I worked with a politician whose policies, I thought, would lead to the end of civilization as we know it. "I can do this," I thought. "I'm a professional." But she kept touching a nerve in my life and about five sessions into our work I caught myself starting to offer suggestions about what the politician should be thinking about and working on. Ultimately, *because* I'm a professional, I was candid with her about what I had found myself beginning to do, and why. We agreed together that a referral to another coach was a good idea and we partnered to close our coaching relationship and to create a strong transition.

When this happens to you, and it will, turn to your tribe and consult. And if you need to, make a referral. This just means that you respect and care for your deeply held—or felt--personal convictions elsewhere in your life.

As we continue on, we'll be asking you to examine your own life, to glance at your historic patterns and to then gaze at your own **second layer**--the layer that helps you know you belong, that we need you and that you are alive in the best of ways. When a coach can lead the way in being vulnerable, trust hits the fast track.

As a Cohort, we'll explore the application of all this to the growth of your coaching presence. Don't worry. In our upcoming sessions we're not going to freak you out, we'll just invite you to continue to test and learn, mostly with "ten percent shifts." As you build your life and maybe your family, what do you want written on your current flag?

We're in your corner.

---

### Read more about it . . .

Hold Me Tight. Dr. Sue Johnson. 2008.

A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix. Edwin H. Friedman. 2007.

Brain Rules. John Medina. 2014.

Say No to Negativity. John Tierney and Roy F. Baumeister. The Wall Street Journal, December 28, 2019. (A summary of their book, The Power of Bad. 2019.)