

Emotion Mining for System Designers

The relationship between managers and emotions is, shall we say, tense. They are still seen as an obstacle to making good decisions – the emotions, I mean.

However, this is surprising in the age of Big Data, because emotions are – among other things – exactly that, namely big data. With emotions we process immense amounts of information in milliseconds - it would be a pity not to use this ability, wouldn't it? All too often the child is poured out with the bathwater when managers try to keep their emotions away, their own and those of conversation partners. The mantras are well-known: "let's not get emotional here, let's stay rational, let's leave your problems alone, this is about business."

It's not stupid at first, because there's no reflex that doesn't dock to a grain of justification: for example, you can help employees deal with change and make friends with it. The greatest possible contribution of managers is to manage change with transparency, integrity and participation. Ultimately, however, employees have to take this road themselves, and they can be expected to make their own contribution. And yes, of course there are neurotic endless loops that lead nowhere, where it makes no sense to stew in their juice for too long and whose solution is a private matter. However – here's a little tip for conducting conversations – even these emotions would like to be heard first, empathetically, before they are declared a private matter, and that also works better if you do it compassionately.

But beware of the thing about the child and the bath: a nice part of emotional reactions are absolutely adequate answers to external circumstances, and here it gets very interesting. On this level, we are lightning fast and extremely accurate in deciphering relationship patterns and structural messages: pattern recognition at its finest. People often feel that a bug is stuck somewhere long before they can name it. As a manager, you may not like to hear this at first, but at that very moment it might be worth taking your time and digging deeper.

If you close your mind to emotional reactions, you will miss a lot of relevant information. However, if you tap into this wealth of information, you may receive valuable indications of structural shortcomings in your organization. This information in turn provides access to intelligent improvement measures. This may enable you to remove structural efficiency brakes or modify processes and regulations in such a way that they fulfil their purpose with fewer harmful side effects and favour desired behaviour.

The high art, of course, is to distinguish the personal and for the company less relevant parts of emotional reactions from the "structurally adequate" ones. But after all, you can talk to people. Most people are willing to engage in such reflection if they have a legitimate hope that both parts will be taken seriously. And by the way: the distinction between relevant and irrelevant data is also important for Big Data. One has already seen examples in which AI systems have understood existing discrimination, which is reflected in data, as a reference and have begun to make recommendations in the sense of common prejudices...

There will always be side effects, but that won't make us ban medicines. So always be mindful, then you will time and again come across a gold mine. It is similar in private life and in business, after all: you can always work on dealing with emotions. You may sweat water and blood with it, but it's worth it in the long run.