Pain Shows You the Way: Navigating Emotional Triggers

Paying attention to the pain you – and others – feel will spur positive change.

By Jessica Hartung

Emotions at work point to what matters. When employees show worry, frustration, confusion, or other types of pain, caring leaders respond by leaning in to those emotions to transform them into positive benefits.

It takes courage and skill to follow the pain point to solutions that lead to new growth, opportunities, and improvement. Starting at the individual level, you can improve your response to pain points. Corrine, for instance, felt the sting of embarrassment when she reviewed a transcript from a steering committee she'd just joined, and she used this pain to make a change.

As she read the transcript, she was shocked at how disjointed her speaking was. She sat down to think and wrote out some questions:

- What do I really want out of this situation?
- Why is it important?
- How can I turn my discomfort into productive action?
- What options do I have?
- What can I realistically do between now and the next committee meeting to improve?
- What help or support am I seeking?

> "It helps to know yourself as completely as possible."

For the next 30 minutes, she wrote out her responses. Over the years, Corrine had developed a method for reflecting and finding answers to issues that confronted her. She would give herself a half hour to journal about her questions and see what actions and insights came from it. Doing so made her feel more confident and focused.

She also knew herself well enough to understand that she was most successful in gaining mastery in an area if she read about it, saw examples of people doing it, and then practiced it herself. She knew she'd be bad at it at first, but she would view it as a learning experiment. She had read about the neuroscience of learning, which confirmed that when you learn by doing, it activates the brain in a way that facilitates retention and mastery. Before embarking on something new, she liked to do some research, which she split into "book knowledge" and "real-world examples."

After reflecting on her responses, she felt clearer about what to do next. She wanted to gain more mastery as an impromptu speaker. So she watched a few recordings from prior meetings and paid close attention to the speakers who were best on their feet. How did they enter into discussions? How did they organize their words? How did they give themselves time to think? What made their comments impactful? What lessened their effectiveness?

Then she recorded a couple of phone calls where she practiced what she was learning. She had those calls transcribed so she could read what she sounded like in print. She chuckled, thinking of her high school tennis coach saying, "Practice the way you want to play." That felt exactly like what she was doing.

At the next committee meeting, Corrine looked around the room, breathed deliberately a few times, and put what she'd been practicing into action. People listened. She felt heard, and so grateful for the time she had practiced.

We can't make a difference if we don't understand what's needed. Those who care enough to feel pain and use it as motivation to change are using their leadership to

make improvements. By identifying the pain points and working through them with honesty and openness, a team or organization can gain ground on what really matters.

Leaders at all levels of the organization can use pain to grow through challenges and create a more effective organization that serves its mission even better. Tracing to the source of a frustration, issue, or challenge so that it can be addressed is a sign of high character in action.

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Self-Reflection Is the Key

Before you can make positive changes in your life and your organization, it helps to know yourself as completely as possible. Jessica Hartung's book, *The Conscious Professional*, and website (jessicahartung.com) offer reflection questions you can use to change yourself for the better. For instance:

When was the last time you set aside some quiet time to notice your thoughts? How about what you're grateful for? Or what's going well for you right now?

How could you add more self-reflection to your life? Where can you find a quiet, uninterrupted space to think? How can you make sure you aren't interrupted?

Consider the perspective of someone you don't agree with. While it may be uncomfortable to consider that person's viewpoint, give it a try. Can you frame that perspective in a constructive light, even though you disagree with it?

What new skills are important for you to develop right now? Who could be an ally or supporter as you build these skills?

Think about a time you felt stuck and then were able to work through it. How did you get unstuck? What strategies have worked well for you in making such growth changes?

In what areas would you like to grow, improve, or learn something new?

What mistakes have you made recently, and how did you handle them? How will you apply what you learned from these mistakes?

What situations trigger upsetting emotions for you? What shift could you make to reduce the impact of those triggers on you? Who might have some ideas to support thinking through new response options?

Can you think of a time when pausing to reflect changed or improved a situation?

Getting to Know You

The better you know yourself, the better you'll be able to lead, to improve, and to succeed. It's not always easy, but the benefits are worth the time and effort. Enhance yourself and your organization by looking deeper, reading articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

To Be an Ingenious Leader, Take Charge of Your Learning (Vol. 37, No. 3)

Outside the Comfort Zone (Vol. 25, No. 3)

How Changing Your Lenses Will Strengthen Your Leadership (Vol. 34, No. 3)

Is It Time for a Time-Out? Take Stock of Your Life (Vol. 31, No. 4)

Find Your Truths and Release Your Powerful Energy (Vol. 31, No. 3)

Think, Dream, and Do (Vol. 28, No. 6)

Time's Up! What Do you Really Want? (Vol. 33, No. 2)

Big Dreams, Little Steps (Vol. 30, No. 3)

35 Ways to Enhance Your Life, Your Organization, & Your Leadership Prowess (Vol. 36, No. 2)

Leading from Feeling (Vol. 27, No. 1)

Overcome People's Resistance with These Steps (Vol. 38, No. 3)