

The fear factor

How to manage fear — in yourself and your organization — and begin to see new possibilities



MY VOICE
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Fear is inescapable today — it permeates the news and our conversations at work and at home. Like a toxic cloud, fear hovers over conversations at the coffee shop, in the check-out line and at business networking events.

Surveys of business owners show a pervasive fear and lack of confidence in today's economic environment, and that fear-filled perspective is driving decisions about spending, investment and business strategy, often to the long-term detriment of the company.

How has this undercurrent of fear become so powerful?

Emotions are contagious; we catch them from those around us, much like the rhinovirus that runs through the company when a coughing, sneezing, feverish co-worker comes to work rather than take a sick day.

Of all of our emotions, too, fear is the most powerful in arousing the primitive brain, that first responder to perceived danger, the part of us that effortlessly overcomes intelligent input. Hormones flood the brain, blood pressure rises and blood flows to the large muscles of the body. Our emotional brain takes command and prepares our body for fight, flight or freeze.

Under the influence of fear, we see fewer options and can spiral into catastrophic thinking. We focus on the short-term, on how to eliminate the danger we perceive. We're not thinking; we're reacting.

Fear finds its expression in short tempers,

conflicts between co-workers, power struggles, withdrawal, pervasive sadness, immobility and uncertainty in the workplace. Once such an environment is created, your business is in danger of losing top-performing employees and long-time customers. They'll flee.

Those who are able to rise above the fear-based thinking will remove themselves from the toxic environment of gloom and doom to avoid getting sucked into the vortex of fear and negativity around them. They know they are better off aligning with a business that is responding rationally rather than reacting emotionally to its challenges.

We often report our feelings as though we are the emotion: "I am worried." To be more precise, we would say, "I feel worried." Beyond just the semantics, this language reflects a frame of reference that dissolves the distinction between the person and the feeling.

When we identify ourselves as the emotional state, we can only see the situation from that perspective.

When we shift to the perspective that we feel the emotion, it becomes a point of information to consider, not necessarily the driver of decisions.

There may be no escaping fear in these uncertain times, but it is possible to manage fear. Here is a suggestion for turning fear from a debilitating force to a facilitating one.

Face the facts and just the facts. An objective, factual review of the forces at work creates a platform for solving the true problem, the one that has generated the feeling of fear.

Don't listen to the advisors who suggest that we avoid reading the daily news during our current economic turmoil and refuse to engage in conversations about what's wrong. While this avoidance may eliminate a trigger

for the fear response, it does not create a foundation for planning actions that will address the real issue.

Rather than avoiding it, state the problem factually. It might sound something like this: "I have \$2,000 and I need \$2,500 to pay my obligations this week." With this statement, the focus is on closing the gap rather than on the terrible things that could happen because of the gap.

Engage the rational brain to generate new possibilities. Create a list of all the possible solutions to the problem you just defined; include everything you can think of. After you run out of ideas, evaluate them to determine which are most feasible.

One simple way to evaluate your possibilities is to rate each idea, either "High" or "Low," on three criteria:

- What is the cost or risk associated with this idea?
- How likely is it that I can actually implement this idea?
- How likely is it that this alternative will solve the real problem?

The best alternative is the one with a low cost or risk, high likelihood that you can implement and that it will actually solve the problem. Next best is one that is highly likely to be do-able and solve the problem but carries a high cost. If all your alternatives fail to pass this test, go back to brainstorming new alternatives; engage others you trust to help you generate new ideas.

Action leads to results. Define the specific actions needed to go from idea to solution.

What will you need to do? What do you need to know? What do you need to stop doing to be successful? Put your plan in writing so you can monitor your activities and track your progress. If it is not in writing, it is a dream, not a plan.

If you encounter unexpected barriers as you move through your action plan, stop and

evaluate what new options are possible. Hold onto the parts of your action plan that are working and modify those that are not. Resist the temptation to

abandon the plan and correct it to fit the new information received.

Reach out and connect with others for support, encouragement and assistance. Find your champions and supporters, those who will help you think through your options and remind you of your strengths.

Eighteenth century philosopher and politician Edmund Burke eloquently described the impact of fear: "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its power of acting and reasoning as fear." Use these tools to overcome the panic or paralysis of fear and move into reason and action in these uncertain times.

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