

**EMOTIONS, MEANING, AND MANAGEMENT**

by

Seth Bernstein, Ph.D.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank all the people who have worked for me over the years. They have taught me most of what I know about being a manager and tolerated the steep learning curve that was part of my learning process. I would also like to thank the supervisors I have worked for over the years, many of whom have been excellent role models.

My psychology professors, supervisors, and psychotherapy clients have also helped me grow as a clinician, thus strengthening the psychological knowledge and skill sets that I brought to my work as a manager.

My wife, Diana, has been a consistent supporter of my writing and has provided helpful editorial feedback. Many friends, particularly Andy Lotterman, have encouraged me to put my thoughts into writing. Jan Rounds has been a very helpful editor.

To all of you and the many friends, family members, and colleagues I failed to mention specifically by name: thank you. I could not have written *Emotions, Meaning, and Management* without your support.

## Preface

I have had an interesting career. I was educated and trained as a clinical psychologist, working in a variety of clinical settings with a wide range of people suffering from behavioral health disorders. While in private practice I began working for a start-up managed care company. Gradually, my clinical work tapered off and my business work took center stage. Prior to becoming the executive director of a publicly owned managed health care organization, I held senior executive positions at a large national consulting firm and a series of managed care organizations owned by national insurance companies. My twenty-seven years as a psychotherapist have informed and influenced my more than twenty years as a manager. Conversely, my experience as a manager has very much informed my work as a psychotherapist and psychologist.

As a manager, I have had the opportunity to observe many behaviors that people only talk about with their therapists. I saw how people's emotional issues played out with their coworkers, customers, and supervisors. I saw how my own emotional issues affected these same individuals. I wish I could say that my training as a psychologist and my experience as a psychotherapist saved me from trial and error learning. I can't. Knowledge is power, but it does not grant immunity! No amount of reading or education can totally protect a person from some painful learning experiences. I do have confidence, however, that this book contains information, guidance, and an opportunities for reflection that will help you, the reader, to become a better manager and to avoid or minimize some of the psychological traps you might otherwise fall into. *Emotions, Meaning, and Management* is the book I wish had been available for me, before I started to manage people.

## Chapter 1

### Being A Manager

As you walk into the conference room for your next meeting your staff are laughing. They're having a great time. As soon as they see you, the laughter stops. For a moment, the smiles remain and knowing looks pass between them. You say with a smile, "I guess you're laughing about me?" They respond, "no, the laughter had nothing to do with you." They adjust their posture and straighten the papers in front of them to indicate that they are ready to get down to the business at hand. It's time to start the meeting.

Your staff were not lying. You just weren't included in their joking around. You are not part of the group. Quite likely your staff were laughing about something that you would have found funny too. They have a great sense of humor. Had a peer walked in the door instead of you, they most likely would have shared what was funny as well as their high spirits. They just weren't sharing their good time with you; you are their boss.

Many managers would not be bothered by this situation; our needs for affiliation vary greatly. However, if you are like me and have a need to feel like part of the group and close to the people around you, being left out hurts. You feel like an outsider, and from your staff's perspective, you are. The people who work for you and you care about generally do not relate to you as a peer. You are "the boss" and that makes you different.

Here is another uncomfortable situation, one that even managers with low affiliation needs can relate to:

*You read an email from one of your staff members in which John grossly misstates a position you have taken regarding a recent policy decision. It's hard to determine how he could have been so far off base. You do not fire back a "Reply To All" email that corrects what John said. Instead, you walk over to John's office and ask him if he has a few minutes to talk. He says "sure," so you sit down and tell him in a calm voice what was inaccurate in his statement. You tell him how his misstatement puts you in an awkward position and that his statement needs to be rectified. John does not lose his cool, but you can see him get more and more detached as he responds to you. The eye contact that is usually present disappears. He makes a number of downward glances as he describes what he will do to address this problem. His voice gets softer and you have to strain to hear him. Over the next week, John does not say hello to you in the morning. When you do pass him in the hall, he is stiff and formal. At points in his work day when he usually would have dropped by your office to consult with you, he doesn't. This behavior makes it difficult for John to do his job - he really needs your regular input to complete his work. It takes two full weeks until his relationship with you is back to "normal".*

*In comparison, you have observed how John relates to his colleagues. Once in awhile John will make a mistake that impacts his work relationship with his peers.. However, when this happens, John's behavior is nothing like his behavior towards you. He doesn't withdraw from his peers. If he finds himself in conflict with a peer he is reasonably forthright in taking responsibility for what happened and taking corrective action. His negative feelings do not linger more than a day or two.*

The difference between how John relates to his boss and how he relates to his coworkers, most likely, has very little to do with how he views his manager as a person. It most likely has to do with the fact that he is relating to a person who is his superior. In this same situation, a different staff member might become sarcastic and attacking. Other staff will ward off any expression of negative feelings. Instead, they shower their boss with over-the-top praise for relatively minor accomplishments.

All of these scenarios have a common denominator: staff are not reacting to their supervisor as a person, they were relating to their manager in his or her role as the authority figure who is their boss. There is nothing you can do that will fundamentally change how supervisees will relate to you as their boss. You will never be their peer. You can or will also need to get used to the fact that no matter how much you know about relationships or how well you have honed your interpersonal skills, the individuals who work for you are sometimes going to react to you in ways that come out of left field and leave you wondering, "what did I do to deserve that?"

Most managers did not enter the workforce as individuals who supervised the work of others. For much of our work lives, we have worked for others. On our "bad days," we reacted to "the boss" in our own idiosyncratic ways, much like how our staff react to us today in our role as their supervisors<sup>1</sup>. Even though we are likely to have more education than our staff, we are likely to relate to our boss in a manner that is not unlike how our staff relate to us. Clearly, there is nothing fundamentally different between the people who are in charge of others and the people who work for them.

It is the role we find ourselves in that frames our perceptions and the perceptions of those who work for us. This framework shapes our behavior in the workplace and profoundly impacts our ability to work together effectively to get the job done, whatever that job may be. The purpose of this book is to assist managers in understanding the details of this framework. The psychological aspects of being the boss and the best approaches for managing effectively are not always self-evident.

---

<sup>1</sup> When managers or staff can easily find other work, they are much less likely to react to their bosses as people in a position in power over them.

## The “End In Mind”

To be effective as a manager, you need to understand the psychological dimensions and psychological realities of your position. People who work for you may react to you in a negative and destructive manner that has nothing to do with who you are as a person or what you have done or said to them. This book will help you understand why this is the case and give you the tools to deal with the most pernicious elements of the boss-worker relationship. It is my hope that after reading *Emotions, Meaning, and Management*:

- You will be more effective as a person in charge of the work of others
- You will less often lose your emotional balance and bearings while at work
- You will channel your needs for affiliation and human contact into relationships with family and friends

An even greater emotional challenge for managers is becoming resigned to the fact that being the boss can leave a manager feeling lonely. This will be discussed in detail, so that you are better prepared for this experience, but knowledge does not necessarily provide an antidote. Loneliness is not a positive feeling. Although there is no antidote for the loneliness that comes with the job, there are many things about being a manager that can compensate. Being “the boss” and being a good one is absolutely critical to the success of your staff and the organization you all work for. As you will learn, it is also critical to your staff’s emotional well-being. The people who work for you, that rely on you for guidance and direction, very much need you to be the person in charge. They don’t need another chum. It is tremendously satisfying to be an important person in the lives of your staff. To help a person grow professionally<sup>2</sup> is an enormous responsibility, but also a great opportunity to bring meaning to your work, to other's work, and to do some good in the world.

There is no simple formula for accomplishing these goals. *Emotions, Meaning, and Management* provides information that is designed to help you develop a style of management that fits who you are as a person, a style that builds on your strengths and minimizes your weaknesses. It will also teach you a set of conceptual and practical tools that will assist you in navigating and managing challenging interpersonal interactions.

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “professional” in its broadest sense. Anyone who sees himself on a career path that requires the accumulation of knowledge and skills to take on tasks of increasing complexity and roles of increasing responsibility is developing “professionally.”