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## **The Social Aura of a Leader: the Upside and the Downside**

by MJ Harwood

To manage can require as little as assigned authority and employees reporting to you. But to truly lead, to be labeled a "leader" by those around you requires much more: demonstrated *competence, character, and caring*. People want to feel that their leader has the competence to lead them in a righteous direction, the high standards and values to make them worthy of their trust, and the empathy to care about the needs of others as well as their own. Within each of these three non-negotiable areas there are a number of different, yet often overlapping, skills. This article focuses on social aura, an individual's "approachability," which falls into the *caring* and *competence* buckets. And before this is cast off as an unimportant detail, know that approachability is what enables people to rightfully challenge things that should be, suggest innovations that could be, and identify changes that need be. All of these are absolute requirements for peak performance. And while this approachability factor is important for everyone, for leaders it is absolutely critical. And approachability requires social, personal, and emotional competence = "EQ" vs. IQ.

In the world of emotional intelligence\*, this social aura is often referred to as a person's "emotional wake"--the vibes put off that either drive people away or draw them in, pick them up or bring them down. Most don't think much about it, and many are truly unaware of how others perceive their emotional wake. Given its significance, however, they should. An individual may indeed care a great deal about others and their input, but if they either don't or are unable to project that caring, connecting with others becomes an enormous--if not impossible--challenge, and connecting is required for high-performance teamwork.

Using clothing styles as an analogy, someone's approachability factor could be defined in many different ways: relaxed and in sweats; energized in costume; casual in khakis; formal in a tux; or ready to defend or attack in football gear and cleats. Clearly, employees and leaders alike need to put on each of these styles at some point, often within the course of a single day or even a single meeting. For example, we need our laid-back sweats when someone needs a listening ear, while we need a more festive style when showing or driving enthusiastic support. As we go through a normal workday we spend most of our time in business casual, but we might need to break out a tux on those rare, more official occasions. And sometimes, although less frequently, we are forced to put on the football gear when an appropriate level of concern or alarm needs to be interjected into the mix when values, needs, goals, or behaviors have broken down and are at risk. High-performers get this.

The emotional-social skill behind *effective* emotional wakes has three components. First, awareness of self and others --understanding just *what* 'style' is generally being projected to others in both stressful *and* non-stressful situations. Second, deciding if that style is the most effective for achieving personal and business goals, whether those are getting a team to peak performance, being considered an effective and desirable teammate, or maintaining productive relationships. And third, developing the skills --the competence-- to change styles when needed to ensure the most appropriate one is being projected for a particular time, person(s), place, or situation.

For leaders in particular, understanding what emotional wakes are being projected by both themselves and others is absolutely critical because it directly impacts performance. Two particular neuro science findings about moods (*emotional wakes*) have clearly demonstrated this. First, *upbeat* moods boost neural activity and increase innovation, productivity, collaboration, and cooperation--all high performance factors. Likewise, *bad* moods dampen these same areas. And second, the mood of the most senior or powerful person in a relationship or on a team, whether

positive or negative, can actually physiologically spread to others. In the scientific community, this "mood spreading" is referred to as emotional contagion, and is further detailed in research papers by Dr. Candace Pert and in the book [Emotional Contagion](#) by Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo and Richard L. Rapson, among others. Clearly then, the up or down moods of leaders and the most influential have significant and consequential side effects.

High-performers appear to project the appropriate 'aura' on demand--either by instinct or by developing and practicing the skills involved--to ensure that they can consciously dress in the style that is needed for any occasion. As a result, they are better able to manage their impact on others, to project a *productive* "wake," and to be more approachable, which gives them the ability to connect with others more optimally. And before you assume that you and your team have this approachability and connect-ability factor, some startling findings may change your mind. According to research gathered over 10 years from 500,000 employee surveys, only 15 percent of workers felt strongly that they were respected and valued by their employer, and 80 percent said they would be likely to leave their current job if offered similar pay and position elsewhere. In addition, 70 percent said they, "have difficulty handling stress, and some of the most challenging circumstances they face are at work. Conflicts at work tend to fester as people passively avoid problems or confront them so aggressively that situations are blown out of proportion."\*\*

Clearly then, people are not connecting with one another very productively, not wearing--or projecting--the most effective emotional clothing as they march through the many daily challenges and events of the workplace. Too often, both leaders and employees put on their less effective and more damaging football gear, either overly defensive or inappropriately aggressive. Whether leader or employee, this style should not be left unaddressed. Used in excess as a deliberate tactic for discipline and achievement, the football gear is an absolute recipe for eventual defeat, both personal and otherwise. If it's not deliberate and seemingly unmanageable, understanding what's driving this reflexive attack-or-defend attitude, with its loud, often non-verbal message, can help with conquering it in ourselves or disarming it in others. Most often, in fact, the culprit is fear--fear of a real or perceived threat to body or psyche (authority, competence, acceptance, ego, etc.) that causes our limbic system to sound an internal alarm, which can manifest itself in the form of a raised fist, a raised (or silenced) voice, or raised blood pressure.

Once we understand this, we're in a position to address it--and potentially neutralize it--through a more thoughtful understanding of what's driving the fear within ourselves or others so that the business of effectively "connecting" can proceed. Neutralizing the threat enables us to take the cleats off and allow others to understand that the cleats aren't even necessary. The good news is that we all can become more proficient at understanding this limbic reaction, often referred to as "emotional hijacking", and we can also retrain our "autopilot" reactive behaviors in order to more thoughtfully respond vs. explosively react – either on the inside or on the outside. We can also become much better at preventing or immediately neutralizing such reactions if we're willing to learn how.\*\*\* *"You don't drown by falling in the water, you drown by staying there."* Edwin Louis-Cole.

Here's to approachable and intentional emotional wakes and the performance levels they can unleash.

\* What is Emotional Intelligence? While expert opinions vary, for the most part they are all in concert on what it consists of – primarily personal and social competence; interpersonal skill. . Their position is effectively expressed more academically by Dr. Reuven Bar-On, PhD. as follows: *"Emotional-social Intelligence is a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope effectively with daily demands."*

\*\* [The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book](#), by Travis Bradberry, PhD and Jean Greaves, PhD.

\*\*\*Recommended reading list on the Exceptional Horizons website under "Resources".



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