

“Should we tailor our emotional responses to each situation or always be consistent?”

BY KATHRYN STREETER



The wide spectrum of personal interactions we’re faced with in the workplace and at home can foster questions about what it means to live consistently and authentically. Is it insincere and weak—perhaps even two-faced—to modify behaviors according to a situation? Conversely, is it a sign of authenticity and strength to respond in a consistent way, no matter the context? Answering this question requires an understanding of how emotional intelligence, also known as emotional quotient (EQ), plays a critical role in approaching each situation effectively—and with kindness.

Licensed clinical psychologist Alexandra Solomon, Ph.D.,

a best-selling author and host of the hit podcast *Reimagining Love* argues against thinking this is a binary question.

In fact, she says it’s *both*.

“There are elements of consistency, and there are elements of specificity,” Solomon, author of *Love Every Day*, explains. There’s the *me* piece, the intra-psycho piece, which ought to be consistent across conversations. Then there’s the *you* piece, which is relational and should be tailored to the individual and the context.

On the surface, this may seem to contradict the desire to live authentically — a theme Solomon says is exceedingly popular at the moment. However, she stresses that authenticity is not about being the same in every situation—it’s far more nuanced. “It’s about effectiveness and discernment.”

APPLYING THE FOUR PILLARS OF EQ

Knowing how to act in every situation means tapping into your EQ. She points to the four pillars of EQ: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills—and explains how they relate to this *me-you* understanding of behavior.

“The first two—self-awareness, self-regulation—these are the *me* things,” Solomon says. Here, you ask yourself, “How am I going to come into a conversation? How am I going to handle myself in the conversation?”

Whether you’re heading into a hard conversation with an employee or a loved one, you hold yourself to certain commitments such as remaining calm, giving the benefit of the doubt, and leading with kindness. She explains these ought to be consistent across all situations: “[These] are *me* values—the values that are reflective of how I want to be as a person.”

The remaining parts of EQ, empathy and social skills, refer to the other person—the *you* piece. This is where tailoring to the situation is key.

“It is empathic to talk differently to your parent when they’re 80 than when they were 60,” Solomon says. This ability to appropriately modulate or change your communication style showcases your empathy and social skills.

The workplace is no different. “I think that part of being an effective co-worker or an effective leader, certainly, is that you understand the other person,” Solomon adds. Some will better receive a critique if it’s encased with positivity. But others will feel patronized, she explains. A kind approach for them is direct and straightforward.

Questions to ask yourself in advance should include, “What’s going to be most effective here?” and “What does this moment call for?” Solomon suggests. These will clarify your approach and help modify behavior accordingly.



“STOP FOCUSING ON WHAT SOMEONE *SHOULD* BE ABLE TO DO AND INSTEAD CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO REIMAGINE EXPECTATIONS.”

THE OUTSIZED ROLE OF SETTING APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS

Fundamentally, there’s a need to level-set expectations no matter the scenario, Solomon points out. “What’s different, though, is what you *do* about it—what action you take.”

Meeting with a struggling employee means grappling with what can be fairly expected of the individual. With more training, can they succeed or are they simply a poor fit? At home, what’s reasonable to expect of your child?

“There’s something quite unkind about continuing to expect something that can’t happen,” Solomon says. It’s hard on you, too, as it’s tiresome to continue to argue with reality and wish things could be different than they really are.

“In all our relationships, we have to keep exploring what’s a reasonable expectation,” says Solomon. Otherwise, you’ll feel frustrated and the person on the other side will feel they’re a disappointment.

Stop focusing on what someone should be able to do and instead challenge yourself to reimagine expectations, she counsels. Abandoning unrealistic expectations is kind—and in the case of an unsuccessful employee, sometimes letting them go is an act of kindness.

WHEN FAMILY AND BUSINESS COLLIDE

Plot twist: What if you work in a family business, which can send two very different worlds potentially on a collision course? Solomon says this situation is extremely common—and cautions that it’s critical to build a firm framework at the outset.

Fully discuss how to protect the relationship, where family stuff fits in at the office, and what boundaries look like. Name your roles aloud, as if re-introducing yourself, she suggests—for example you could say, “I am your little sister. I will always be your little sister. And yet, when we’re in the workplace, I’m your boss.”

Having an honest conversation about all these types of potential pitfall issues. Then, create a set of clear agreements you’ll have waiting to fall back on.

“In the best of situations, it’s enriching. But how you start matters,” she says. ♦

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