

■ Emotional Intelligence

Lessons from a 1-Pound Furball

by Tom Terez

After being on the road for four days of hard work, I couldn't wait for a warm welcome of hugs from my two daughters. What I got instead was a rodent – and a memorable lesson in emotional intelligence.

The moment I walked in the door, 5-year-old Annie made an announcement: “Dad, we’re gonna get a hamster!”

“A what?” I asked, still holding my suitcase.

Annie could see the surprise on my face. She looked at her mother and said it again – this time a bit tentatively.

I gave my wife the “let’s talk” look and attempted my best noncommittal smile. Annie took in the situation and instantly retooled.

“Dad?” Strategic pause. Smile. Adorable eyebrow raise. “Can we get a hamster?”

Let me give you some important background: As a youngster, I grew up with a white miniature poodle named Angel. Never was a creature so misnamed. Angel terrorized our 1950s Cape Cod home, routinely biting family members, relatives, friends, mail carriers, furniture legs – just about anything that had physical form. She spared

only my mother, who served as Angel’s friend and protector throughout the dog’s extremely long life. Those demon-filled dog days are what prompted my vow, made some 30 years ago, never to get a pet with teeth.

So Annie’s declaration gave me pause. The ambush nature of it didn’t help. And Annie, all of 5 years old, could tell as much just by reading my reaction.

She and her 7-year-old sister, Melanie, quickly dropped the subject. They disappeared into a room while I conferred with their mother to find out why

she wanted a rodent in our otherwise wonderful house. I learned that they had been talking about pets in general and hamsters in particular ever since my departure.

The four of us met again an hour later, at the dinner table. That’s when Annie literally stood on her chair and made a different kind of announcement. “Let’s have a meeting,” she said.

Melanie took it from there. “Dad, we know you don’t like pets. But you won’t have to do any of the work. You won’t even have to touch him.”

“We promise!” Annie confirmed.

Melanie shared some documents they had prepared for the dinner meeting. Included was a list of hamster-related chores, complete with checkmarks in front of each one. “We’ll do all this ourselves,” they declared.

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They also had several crayon drawings showing the hamster safely sequestered in a glass box – with the kids standing by, ready to do the chores while protecting Dad from those powerful rodent incisors.

One by one, Annie and Melanie anticipated and voiced my concerns. They methodically addressed each one with carefully considered commitments. By the end of our meeting, we were all nodding happily. Yes indeed, our home would be happier with a hamster!

And it is. Pongo the hamster is alive and well

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and very much a part of our family, ever since its purchase (\$7.99) from a local pet store six months ago. It's a so-called teddy bear hamster, furrrier than most, less squirmy, and cute as can be. Think of Stuart Little, the mouse made famous in a 1999 movie and 2002 sequel, and you'll appreciate just how much we love him. Angel be damned.

But this story is less about rodents and more about emotional intelligence. It's about emotional awareness, understanding, and management. And it applies to all of us regardless of age.

In most workplaces, technical skills and cognitive intelligence (IQ) are the dominant measures of a person's potential. These are what get people hired. And they're often the key to getting people promoted. That's a shame, because they're only part of the intelligence equation. Have you ever worked with someone who was smart as a whip and a true expert in the field – but had the emotion-management skills of a concrete slab? That's what I'm talking about.

What is emotional intelligence? It's the ability to recognize our own emotions and the emotions of others, to understand why those emotions are unfolding and what it all means, and to use the resulting insights to handle the situation more effectively. That's exactly what Annie, who has heard all about Angel and can feel my pet-induced pain, did after her initial enthusiastic announcement.

Sure, there's more to it than that – just check out a book like Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* or *Working with Emotional Intelligence*.

But the overall concept is pretty simple. It's all about being smart in matters of the heart.

How important is it? According to UCLA research, just 7% of leadership success is due to intellect. The rest results from trust, integrity, authenticity, honesty, creativity, presence, and resilience – all a part of emotional intelligence. The Center for Creative Leadership found that when careers get knocked off track, the most common reason (75%) is that people lack crucial emotional competencies – they can't deal effectively with interpersonal problems, they can't guide teams through conflicts and other turbulence, and they can't adapt to change or gain trust. There are countless studies like these.

So the next time you're proposing an idea or working to resolve a conflict or trying to make a decision with colleagues, resist the rush to action. Instead, turn on your emotional radar, and use your discoveries to chart the best approach. It will take more time, but it will be much more effective. Just ask Annie and Melanie.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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