

**The emotions of  
finding out:  
reconnecting  
people and work**



**David Arkell**

**David Arkell tells us about the research journey which took him from trying to reconcile performance management ‘excellence’ systems with emotional intelligence, to that of developing a whole new approach to leadership, called ‘Reflective Emotive Practitioning’ (REP), resulting in the creation of international projects on sustainable development and climate change within the public sector organisation in which he works.**

A decade ago, a well-known organisational researcher claimed that, ‘We are on the brink of relocating feelings as a focal point for organisational studies.’ Ten years later, despite a plethora of studies on emotional intelligence, it is questionable whether there has been any substantial change in this direction. Our sense of ourselves as emotional beings still seems to be shut down by powerful systemic structures such as performance management which inhibit change in research or practice.

In this article, I share my story of grappling with the theory and practice of emotions. It shows how I myself moved from wanting to try

and bring together ideas of performance management, excellence and emotional intelligence, to realising that what needed to change were myself, and my relationship to others.

### **The situation**

I am a senior manager in a public sector organisation leading three teams. We are fortunate to have senior management support to pursue innovation. We are a self-financing unit bringing a ‘profit’ of external funding and developing a high external profile.

## **Bridging the theory/practice divide: finding a research approach**

How many of you have experienced that huge disappointment, when, after an inspiring training or away day, life back at the ranch instantly falls back into a sense of dullness or irritation? Whatever happened to that shared emotional energy? Why did it not seem possible to experience this collective energy in the organisational culture? These were the questions that interested me, and which I wanted to research. My sense was that this was something to do with emotions, but I did not really know how to tackle it.

Falling back on my management training, and with the zealousness of the beginner, I began by researching emotion within an 'excellence framework model' believing that getting people to convey their emotions and translate them and then score them in an accepted model would enable us to begin allowing our emotions into the workplace.

It was many frustrating months before I came to know just how shallow this 'emotional' research was. I was unwittingly still acting within organisational power fields. Slowly, and painfully, I began opening up in supervisions and really reflecting on the relationship between my work experience and the research I wanted to do. This period of self-reflection was a painful undoing of several years of practice and academic post-graduate study – yet it was perhaps the most fruitful part of my research.

This shocked and moved me, and left me wondering that if I, undertaking research in emotions, and trying to find a way of stimulating my team to express theirs, have such an intrinsic pre-programmed understanding then what hope is there for our organisations' 'enlightened' managers, aiming to get in touch with emotions using 'models' and 'tools' of conventional organisational development schools of thought? I realised that I had to let go of everything that I had previously believed in if I was going to really find a way of understanding and engaging with emotions in the workplace. I needed to reorient myself and my project. The emotional journey needed to start right here, with myself, and not with the abstract theories of management.

In research terms, I saw that my original ontology (way of thinking about the world) and epistemology (knowledge about the world) was confused. Whilst I had a clear intention to pursue

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the common good by engaging emotions, my ability to do this was fundamentally flawed as I still had a research mind-set set within a ‘good versus bad’ moralistic framework. Thus, I was already locking down my own emotional ability to engage my imagination by making judgements about which emotion was good or bad. In short, I was repressing that which I was conditioned to see as ‘bad’ – such as anger, frustration, irritation and only allowing myself to experience and articulate that which I was conditioned to see as ‘good’, or ‘acceptable’ within the modern organisation. I was having a limited experience of myself, conditioned by my past, and the organisational culture in which I found myself. And not only was this my experience – it was also that of others. None of us, it seemed, were able to make a connection with our own ‘interiority’ (Hillman, 1975) or our soul’s ability to connect via emotional communication.

### **Towards a new way of being: reflective emotive practitioning (REP)**

This was enough to set me on a path of emotional change that resulted in a new and different way of communicating and working. Further, this has enabled our team to overcome some really difficult obstacles by working together in ways that the traditional organisational culture would not have permitted. This is a bold claim but my team have referred to this change as being empowering for them too.

This process is not the traditional and rational ‘change management’ process, but rather an exhilarating connection with our collective vision leading ultimately to prosperous survival. I use the word ‘survival’ as I believe that the endemic organisational process and culture would have led to a closure of the team and its work if we had not found a way of connecting with our base instincts, soul and imagination to steer us through the mire. This is not a criticism of my organisation but praise for leadership vision which gave us enough freedom and encouragement to define ourselves and our goals through self and collective reflec-

tion such that we ended up delivering freedom for my team collectively to resounding results.

To be more concrete here, often the perennial public sector spending squeezes mean that the use of rational control ratchets up. This limits space, time and energy to think and be creative, and can sap the soul of the worker to do good work. Our growing REP culture quickly manifested itself in the winning of substantial external funding awards increasing our reputation and leading to further creative projects. My colleagues and partners have explicitly explored and created an emotional connection to the outputs, ranging from community buildings, new businesses and education courses – all of which impact on our frontline.

However, let's be under no illusion – there is passionate argument and emotional displays, but these are not closed down by hierarchical power and order. Where possible informal team dialogue resolves issues, but again this is no nirvana – a realistic flux of people and emotions results in people moving out and changing. Where necessary, project-defined 'Chinese walls' enable clusters of innovation to focus on development that cannot be accommodated across the whole team. For example, some team members have moved with the development of a sustainable and affordable housing project; still within the team but operating as a not-for-profit business.

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REP leads to a change that is felt and produced organically, and not ordained by hierarchical power fields. Confidence and trust grows, and is fuelled by success, but even more importantly by our honest emotional responses, which enables us to deal with problems head-on and take risks. For example, by engaging and allowing our emotions freer play, I was moved by others' and my emotions to change the business direction with a major partner. Whilst the alliance seemed logical there was no emotional alignment between the parties. This took nearly two years to turn around but the team sees this success as growing our confidence in an ability to change things when necessary. The result is a different and profitable partnership with the same organisation but on acceptable terms. This illustrates the organic power REP

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has within the conventional background power structures of a large organisation.

On further reflection some time later I can see how I was ‘carried’ (rather than rationally motivated) to act emotionally as the leader in engaging the emotions of trusted senior managers for support for change. This was a communal and base instinctual power that I had not previously felt, but one that has excited us and given confidence in ourselves and in the channels of the organisation. I believe this is illustrative of what Hillman calls ‘ideation’ – a therapeutic education process.

### **REP images and ways of working**

This account does not describe an ideal or utopian new way; rather it demonstrates, what we might call a manifestation of ‘soul’ by meaningful and authentic emotional communication – a communication going on right now in writing this paper and in our workplaces. This way we can nurture human emotional energy to create heartfelt, as opposed to merely rational, solutions to modern day challenges. As we face ever more fast-paced and unknown global and local problems, I realise that the only authentic way forward is for an ever-increasing sensing into of our emotional beings and landscapes. We see our lives in a continuum between office and home. We attempt not to be different people in either. After all, we are both producers and consumers on our planet.

### **Conclusion**

The energy of emotion is both physical and spiritual, and is communicated through symbols, words, and silence. No research frame can capture this entirely. REP is a method of both research and practice, taking place in a crucible of transformation. The crux of REP is being able to hold our emotions in the changing and confusing workplace so that we may become ourselves in what we do.

It is a continuous crystallising process of knowing and becoming, not a linear pathway to knowledge and endings. This is radical research that has been emotional, even traumatic at times, for both myself and my team. However, it has resulted in significant inner growth and externally acknowledged success. I look forward to being able to share this in my on-going journey in my academic and business life.

#### **References**

Hillman, J. (1975) *Re-Visioning Psychology*, Harper Perennial, NY