

The following article by Dick Thompson, Ph.D., President & CEO of High Performing Systems, Inc., outlines the role stress plays in reducing one's ability to fully access his emotional intelligence which may lead to degraded leader performance.

How Stress Impacts Emotional Intelligence and Leader Performance

Why do good leaders with proven track records sometimes suddenly begin making really bad decisions—or no decisions? While there are numerous well-known public examples of this in large organizations, e.g., Enron, WorldCom, etc., it also happens every day at all leadership levels—not just at the top. Stress and its impact on cognitive and emotional abilities may provide at least a partial explanation for what I call *Catastrophic Leadership Failure (CLF)*.

My research in the areas of leadership, stress, cognitive ability and emotional intelligence over the last 25 years has led me to the conclusion that when a leader's stress level is sufficiently elevated, whether on the front line of a manufacturing process, in the emergency room, the Boardroom or on the battlefield, his ability to fully and effectively use his cognitive ability and emotional intelligence in tandem to make timely and effective decisions is significantly impaired. This often leads to catastrophic results or CLF.

When a leader encounters a stressor, a cascade of neurotransmitters and hormones (including catecholamines—epinephrine, norepinephrine, dopamine—and cortisol and glucocorticoids) is released into her system resulting in a short-term increase in strength, concentration, and faster reaction time. These changes may be helpful in the initial response to a stressful event.

If the elevated stress becomes high enough for a long enough period of time, however, deleterious effects will follow. The initial release of neurotransmitters and hormones into a leader's system begins to affect major brain systems, particularly the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and the Amygdala. The PFC, or CEO of the brain, controls “higher” level thinking processes, e.g., logic, analysis, decisionmaking, etc.—a significant portion of the leader's IQ.

The amygdala is sometimes described as our emotional center and plays a major role in emotional responses. It responds incredibly fast to incoming stimuli. But fortunately, in most cases, the PFC is able to exert control over the amygdala reactions and help the leader avoid what Daniel Goleman calls “amygdala hijacking.”

Too much stress “turns off” the PFC, resulting in a drop in cognitive ability (including IQ) and in ability to control the amygdala. At the same time, the increased stress “turns on” the amygdala creating an oversensitive heightened state of emotion. A leader loses a significant amount of ability to “control” his emotions, thus becoming temporarily less emotionally intelligent! Stress reduces the leader's ability to fully access her IQ and emotional intelligence abilities.

(Note: Emotional intelligence will also be referred to as EQ or emotional quotient.) If leaders lose full access to their EQ under stress, then leaders should score differently under “stress” as compared to “normal” conditions on an instrument that measures EQ. To explore this question, I asked 62 leaders to complete the EQ-i (Emotional Quotient Inventory) under normal conditions and then again under a simulated “stressed” mindset.

Under normal conditions the total EQ-i (TEI) score averaged 101. The EQ-i has a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. The “stressed” condition had a TEI average score of 80—more than a standard deviation lower. In fact, all 15 subscales showed significant degradation under “stress” ([Thompson, 2005](#)). This finding supports the hypothesis that EQ degrades under stress and also has significant implications for the interpretation of EQ-i scores. A standard question practitioners ask at the beginning of a feedback session is “What was going on with you at the time you completed the EQ-i?” This question takes on much greater significance in light of the findings above.

Catastrophic Leadership Failure occurs when a leader experiences enough stress to cause a dramatic drop in IQ and EQ resulting in a loss of access to his cognitive decisionmaking abilities combined with a heightened emotional state which makes him incapable of making appropriate leadership decisions. At some level of stress, there will be a sudden, catastrophic drop in leader performance, or CLF.

When CLF happens, the leader displays some or all of a characteristic set of deleterious behaviors, such as: not listening; over-analyzing; stops making decisions; makes “emotional” decisions; “flip-flops”; makes reactive, short-term, fear-based or anger-facilitated decisions; self-satisficing; hedonistic; or attentional blindness.

As EQ practitioners, we must beware of the impact of stress on our clients **and** ourselves. That extra cup of espresso might be enough to push a leader (or a practitioner) over the catastrophic edge into CLF.

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Dr. Thompson presented the results of his research in London at the International Conference on Emotional Intelligence (ICEI™ 2007); where he spoke on “How Stress Impacts Emotional Intelligence and Leader Performance.”