

NASA'S NEW CULTURE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE PREVAILS

Ever since a one-pound chunk of foam insulation ripped from the space shuttle Discovery during lift off on July 26th, we've been dragged through two weeks of hemming and hawing over gap fillers, protruding debris and thermal blankets. These highly technical discussions would be worthy of the public's attention, if they had more to do with getting seven heroic astronauts back to earth safely.

It seems the best decisions aren't made in an enlightened moment of inspired genius, but rather when one has the composure to let common sense prevail. On Tuesday, the wounded space shuttle penetrated the earth's atmosphere at 17,500 miles per hour, reaching temperatures as high as 3,000 degrees F, and landed safely. How?

NASA big wigs swallowed their pride and rescued an ailing craft that will forever serve as the symbol of our aging fleet. NASA took the damage seriously—this time—because their grievous decisions in the Challenger and Columbia tragedies shocked them into abandoning a recklessly gung-ho culture.

In 1986, experts agreed the space shuttle Challenger could explode if launched in very cold weather. It was just 36 degrees F at Cape Canaveral during the scheduled lift off, which happened in spite of the project engineers' concerted attempts to delay the launch for warmer weather. Why did NASA launch the Challenger in cold weather? It appears the decision to go ahead was an emotional one, rather than a rational one. While official documents point the blame at the malfunction of an O-ring, it was NASA's can-do culture that commissioned the launch.

NASA initiated a major O-ring improvement effort the summer before the Challenger launch. Engineers worked for months attempting to fix its cold weather defects, but in the end were unable to create a seal that would hold. The day before the launch, they delivered 14 viewgraphs in a presentation to NASA executives, detailing their concerns about the risks of conducting a launch at the forecasted temperature. The engineers ended their presentation with the clear recommendation not to launch below 53 degrees F. NASA management deliberated briefly and announced the launch would proceed the following morning as planned.

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Why would NASA ignore the engineers' recommendation? Leaders at the Kennedy Space Center feared public reaction to further delays. NASA's scientific culture lacked emotional intelligence, or the ability to keep its head on straight and think rationally in the face of intense emotion. NASA leadership leaned on alternate evidence that supported their hope the O-ring could hold up in cold weather.

After the disaster, Challenger was treated as a repairable anomaly in shuttle design, and NASA leadership fell prey to the same flawed decision-making 17 years later. The space shuttle Columbia, like the Challenger, was destroyed by NASA's inability to choose a precautionary course of action. The evidence seeking prudence was there for Columbia, as it was for Challenger, and none heeded the warning. The dangers of both missions fell on the deaf ears of an administration seeking to save face with the public.

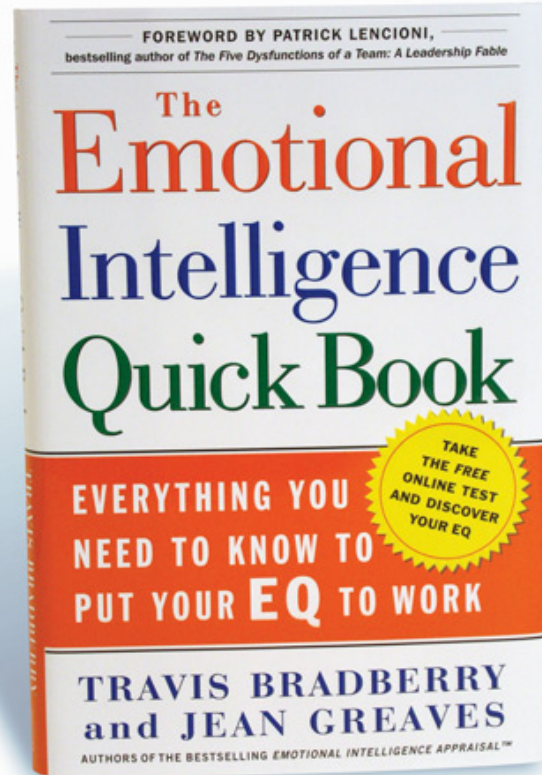
It appears that Discovery's safe landing on Tuesday was a different story primarily because NASA spent the last 2.5 years, and more than \$1.4 billion, learning how to be more emotionally intelligent. True, much of the time and money was spent on engineering and technology, which is highly valuable, but NASA also went through a drastic culture change; the kind that can change how people collectively choose a direction under great duress.

Today, US citizens are the proud owners of a space agency that cautiously honors the dangers inherent in extra-planetary travel. Without a single life lost in space prior to the Challenger disaster, there was little onus at NASA to proceed with additional caution before that point. Today, there is no excuse.

Engulfed by the flood of positive emotion that comes with Discovery's successful mission, one might expect the folks at NASA to be knee-deep in plans for the next shuttle launch. Not the case, as NASA's new culture of emotional intelligence prevails. The aging fleet of Space Shuttles is grounded indefinitely. NASA stands behind the simple statement made by program manager

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Bill Parsons on July 28th, upon discovery of the damage to the Shuttle just 48 hours after launch, “we’re not ready to fly again.” Sometimes, emotional intelligence is as simple as staying on the perch when you know your wings have just been clipped.



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Dr. Bradberry is the President of TalentSmart® and a recognized expert in emotional intelligence, who speaks regularly on the topic in corporate and public settings. He is an avid researcher and has conducted several large-scale studies examining leadership and emotional intelligence across industry lines.

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