

Can a Leader Afford to Feel Low?

By Sebastien Henry, Executive Coach & Trainer

Leading with Emotional Intelligence Expert for Progress-U Ltd.



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As a leader, can we afford to experience periods when we feel low, perhaps to a point that we can not lead our team properly? If this happens, how should we react and adjust? Is there any alternative to just pretending that everything is all right?

First of all, let's put things in perspective. These times when everything around looks dark happen to many leaders, even to some of the most prestigious ones.

For example, in the book "Lincoln's Melancholy", Joshua Wolf Shenk relates how Lincoln struggled with several bouts of severe depression in his life, but learned how to cope with it. (For more information, visit, www.lincolnmelancholy.com).

The most successful French President in the 20th century, Charles De Gaulle, is also reported to have had recurring episodes of low spirits.

So feelings of low spirits happen to leaders more often than we imagine. But how do we react and adjust when this happens to us?

The most common strategy is to pretend that everything is all right and go on as if nothing special is happening. This is like wearing a mask. Since emotions are indisputably contagious, leaders usually choose this strategy to avoid spreading their low feelings to the whole team and creating adverse consequences.

But there may be cases when, as leaders, **we can get unexpected support from people around us, whether peers or team members, by sharing openly with them what is going on.** Sharing with them that we are feeling low at the moment requires moving away from the myth of the "bulletproof leader" that most management reviews and books promote extensively. It also makes us more human.

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Let's take an analogy. Mountaineers usually climb mountains tied to each other with a rope as a safety measure in case one of the team members falls. The leader, who is the most experienced climber in the team, usually climbs first, because it is the most dangerous position.

Now, here is the key point. There are times during an ascension, lasting often more than 10 hours, when the leader is tired, or can not find the way, or suddenly loses confidence and starts feeling low. What happens then is that the "second" climber in the line swaps position with the first and temporarily takes the lead.

By doing so, the leader has a chance to recover his full strength. Leaders with an oversized ego may have difficulty accepting this. But leaders who are wise will.

What can we learn from this analogy? **Sharing openly that we are feeling low, at least to some key people we trust, can take us out of our isolation as a leader and bring us precious support.**

Of course, this is not always possible. It is just an option that is often overlooked, and I encourage you to consider it when you are feeling low.

Whatever the option you choose, you can **make the most out of periods of low spirits by accepting that there will be times when you will have low spirits, and by valuing these periods as a source of insights.**

Accepting these periods of low spirits means not fighting them, denying them, or trying to move out of the uncomfortable zone by artificial means. This is a tough step when scores of self-help books "teach" us to remove bad feelings as soon as possible.

Valuing these periods of low spirit as a source of insights means that such periods hint at some adjustment process at work somewhere inside us. Often, **there is a message for us in it.** Perhaps the objectives we have set are not the most suitable.

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Perhaps our life is not as balanced as we thought. Perhaps we are working with the wrong people, or for the wrong company. Or perhaps we are living disconnected from our values, away from what matters most to us.

Conclusion

If you feel low for a period that seems significant to you, consider the option to share your experience with people you trust in your company. And don't forget to pick up the message waiting for you. There may be precious insights hidden in your low spirits.



Sebastien Henry is **Progress-U's expert for Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and stress management**. He works with executives who would like to:

- avoid feeling exhausted and uprooted as their career takes them to the top;
- become more inspiring leaders by developing their Emotional Intelligence (EQ) at work; and, as a consequence,
- be able to motivate their people more and retain the best.

Sebastien is convinced that leaders who know how to strengthen and use their Emotional Intelligence can make a big difference in their respective organizations because they are leaders for whom people want to commit and give their best.

Sebastien worked in an Asia-Pacific regional position at a multinational company and has also worked with Japanese and Chinese teams in Tokyo and Shanghai, respectively. His experience allowed him to practice the art of leading and listening across cultures and to experiment extensively on how to develop Emotional Intelligence in his daily work life. He is currently writing a book on this topic.

His articles on Emotional Intelligence in Leadership have been published in Human Resources and South China Morning Post.

Sebastien draws the tools he uses and shares from several areas of his life: his business experience as a corporate executive, his intensive practice of mountaineering and rock climbing (7a on-sight and more than 50 alpine routes), his involvement in teaching and coaching prisoners, and his daily meditations for more than six years.

He has coached several high-ranking executives, including an Asia/Pacific General Manager, a Country General Manager, and Department Heads.

His native language is French, but he also speaks and writes in Mandarin, English, and Japanese.

His credentials include:

- MBA, BA in Psychology, BA in Philosophy,
- Certified NLP Practitioner and Master Practitioner,
- Certified NLP Trainer (NLP, USA),
- Certified Coach (ICC),
- More than 40 days of training with the Gestalt approach at the Paris School of Gestalt,
- Certified Trainer of the "EQ Impact Learning" program (Talentsmart, USA).

Sebastien gives one-to-one executive coaching, key note speeches, and group seminars and workshops such as listed below:

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