

Book Review

David, Susan. (2016). *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*. London: Penguin Life.

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The term ‘emotional agility’ was first coined by Susan David and Christina Congleton in a Harvard Business Review article published in 2013, and has since been hailed as a “management idea of the year” and the “next emotional intelligence” (David, p. 11).

Emotional agility is about accepting and addressing the seven basic types of emotion – joy, anger, sadness, fear, surprise, contempt and disgust – as they arise. It’s about being “in the moment, changing or maintaining your behaviours so that you can live in ways that align with your intentions and values” (p. 11).

In chapters 4-8 she presents a four-step method for accepting and addressing emotions, grounded in Steven Hayes’ Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). These steps are:

1. Show up to good and bad emotions and thoughts, label them properly and learn from all of them
2. Step out of them, accept them for what they are – not facts, not absolute directions – and get a broader view
3. Walk the why i.e. live by your own values
4. Move on

What readers may find particularly interesting are her introductory chapters dedicated to ‘hooks.’ Her definition of a hook is “usually a situation you encounter in your day-to-day life ... when you automatically respond in whatever unhelpful way you do ... Your autopilot response” (pp. 20-21). In addition to the identification of the four most common types of hook – thought-blaming, monkey mindless, old/outgrown ideas, wrongheaded righteousness

(pp. 34-38) – she writes extensively about hooks at work in chapter 9. Coaches may find here some new tools to use with their executive clients that help them reflect upon their behavior in times of stress. Individuals will appreciate David’s advice on how to deal with these hooks and move on.

What stands out for me is the “sea-saw principle” (chapter 8) and “job crafting” (chapter 9, pp. 209-212). The first is about finding balance between challenge and competence, which can be associated with the concepts of comfort/stretch/panic zones used in performance coaching. The second is about “tweaking” one’s job to one’s advantage – in other words, making those small steps that are so valuable to coachees. It is worth mentioning that David points out that what psychologists call mindset is also known as beliefs, and these can be tweaked too (p. 135).

David talks at length about two well-researched coping strategies to deal with negative emotions and thoughts: bottling (ignoring) and brooding (ruminating). When used as default strategies, neither of these serves one’s health or happiness (p. 49). She expands further by considering the influence of group hooks in life, giving examples of individuals being hooked in the collaborative world of work (pp. 194-200) and susceptible to “social contagion” (p. 112, p. 201).

The most striking example of social contagion which David sees as another “unproductive way of coping with life’s stresses” is happiness (p. 51). This may come as a surprise to some readers. No doubt, positive emotions are drivers to success. But what David highlights is related to the socially acculturated ways of dealing with emotions: “the paradox of happiness.” She writes: “Research shows it’s possible ... to experience the wrong types of happiness, and to go about trying to find happiness at the wrong time and in the wrong ways” (p. 55) – a useful statement to add to a leadership coaching repertoire of quotes, along with Steven R. Covey’s views about the ladder of success leaning against the wrong wall.

One of the emotionally agile behaviors that David strongly advocates is “taking a meta-view – the view from above that broadens your perspective and makes you sensitive to context” (p. 92). This psychological skill is needed to move from being stuck to having choices. The meta-view can be developed in various ways, which David describes in her book, and which are sometimes displayed in useful didactic boxes. The Pennebaker’s Writing Rules exercise attracted my attention because of its differences in practice and goals with journaling used by some coaches and clients as part of their reflective practice.

This exercise is a daily strictly timed practice (20 minutes) of writing about emotional experiences but it involves throwing the physical or electronic output away. Doing this “creates the distance between the thinker and the thought, the feeler and the feeling” (p. 88).

In addition, mindfulness is identified as a way to open up that vital space between stimulus and response, between thought and action. Regrettably, only a limited number of pages (pp. 93-98) are dedicated to mindfulness (which has become a “buzzword”), and none to mindfulness-based therapies.

In summary, *Emotional Agility* is a useful resource for coaches who wish to revisit or deepen their approach. Written in an easy-to-read style, and packed with stories, including many of the author’s own, the book is accessible to both coaches and their clients.