How feeling ambivalent can improve decisions

Why you do not want to ignore mixed emotions

How often have you had a conversation with a colleague, a client or a boss when you feel uncertain about what they are saying?

It is not that you don’t agree with what they are saying, but that you feel slightly uncomfortable at the same time or you are ambivalent about their approach.

Uncertainty or mixed emotions are more common than you may think as we naturally tend to split our experience and our emotions into polarities such as: good/bad or right/wrong, love/hate and joy/sadness.

Every time someone says “yes” there is a “no” in the background informing their choice.

If they are saying “yes” to something wholeheartedly the “no” has been considered and rejected.

However, if their emotional need to say “no” interferes with their “yes,” it will be said with hesitation and doubt, and a lingering uneasy feeling that causes them to hold back and not commit fully to the “yes.”

For example, emotionally we might see a job loss as disappointing, but also as an exciting opportunity to spend more time with family or to try something new resulting in a general unease about the situation.

How useful are these mixed feelings – do they enhance performance or not – are we better trying to solve these mixed feelings or go with the flow even if they make us feel ambivalent or uncertain?

Research on ambivalence or mixed emotions has been inconsistent, with some studies suggesting they improve performance while other studies suggest the distraction of ambivalent emotions causes poor decision making.

However, the latest research from Cristiano Guarana and Morela Hernandez at the University of Virginia, provides valuable new insight into why using our ambivalent or mixed emotions are important in improving decision making and raising performance.

They argue that we find conflicting research because it depends on how we process mixed feelings.
They suggest mixed feelings can be processed as an indication that a situation is more complex, which leads to more focused thinking, resulting in a more comprehensive solution and better decision making.

However, some people process mixed feelings by focusing on the feelings of unease rather than the cause of the unease, producing poor decision making.

They tested their theory by using 200 volunteers from a variety of organisations.

In the first stage of the research, they asked them to write a short passage on a personal experience that resulted in them having mixed feelings or feeling ambivalent.

In the second stage, the group was split, with half of the group being warned the next task could make them feel ambivalent towards the task.

Both groups were then asked to read a short article about the discovery of a fraudulent drug trial that had resulted in a dangerous drug being launched on the market.

After reading the article they were asked to decide what was more likely to happen next from 2 possible options:

1) The drug was taken off the market.
2) The drug was taken off the market after killing a number of people.

This classic decision making task was a trick. It is based on the idea that specific conditions (Option 2) are more probable than a single general one (Option 1).

However, the probability of two events occurring together (in "conjunction") is always less than or equal to the probability of either one occurring alone.

Most people get this type of problem wrong because they assume (wrongly) that independent statements are somehow connected.

The results showed that those in the group that had been primed to think about their mixed feelings were more likely to choose the right option. They associated the drug trial with those feelings and thought more deeply about the options before choosing the right answer.

The EBW View

The research of Cristiano Guarana and Morela Hernandez, shows that being aware of feelings of ambivalence or having mixed feelings is as important to improving performance in the workplace as focusing on primary and secondary emotions (fear, happiness, envy, pride, etc.).

Interestingly, their further research showed that participants scoring low on a measure of emotional control are more likely to benefit from focusing their mixed or ambivalent feelings about a situation when making decisions.
Whilst many employees/managers may like to move forward by focusing on one polarity of experience/emotion to improve performance they should not dismiss ambivalent feelings or ignore them but instead focus on identifying what is causing them.

So the next time you or one of your colleagues is feeling unsure or ambivalent about a decision, there are 3 simple steps to remember to guarantee an improvement in the decision outcome:

1. Take a step back and take some time.
2. Don’t be tempted to either make or force a quick commitment or a decision to resolve the unease and ambivalent feelings.
3. Analyse the situation, focus on understanding the emotions behind the ambivalence and what is driving them.

If you want to build leaders and teams who make inspired decisions and transform your organisation, contact an EBW Licensed Facilitator for a demonstration on the EBW System and approach.

Reference