Identifying Your Emotional Triggers

Emotional Self-Awareness is the foundational competency of Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Self-Awareness is being aware of “what” you’re feelings are; not “how” you are feeling. Identifying people, things and events that trigger your emotions (whether positive or negative) is a first step to becoming emotionally self-aware. Following the simple steps below will help you identify your emotional triggers and enable you to think more clearly during emotionally charged situations.

The first step is to understand that you are responding to the primal “fight or flight” reaction when you are faced with a physical or psychological threat. It’s easy to see that negative emotions can result from physical threats, but there are also psychological threats that can trigger negative emotions. Psychological threats include being frustrated in pursuing a goal, being treated unjustly, being demeaned or insulted, as well as having your dignity/self-esteem or security threatened. Thousands of years ago our emotional triggers were more likely comprised of physical threats – our daily goal was to survive predators, famine and whatever else the day brought. Today our hot buttons are typically psychological threats.

Next identify and list those people, events, situations or things that evoke negative emotions (anger, annoyance, hurt, frustration, etc.). Some of these you will be able to recall, others you might list as you go through your day or week. For example...

when someone cuts you off while you are making a point during a meeting
when you are about to make a difficult phone call
when you find yourself annoyed just by seeing an email has arrived from a particular person
when your teenager comes home with a “D” on a paper
when you don’t have the resources required to complete a project you are responsible for
when you hear that the company is going to reorganize again
when a project deadline is shortened dramatically
when a parent is ill and you need to make arrangements to care for him or her
when you show up to a meeting on time and only half the people are there
when you see a family member who causes contention in the family
when you keep getting interrupted while trying to meet a deadline
etc.

Finally, look over your list and identify those hot buttons (people, things, situations) that evoke the strongest negative emotions. It may not be possible to avoid these, but just being alerted to how emotionally charged these situations can be can help you to start managing the negative emotions and think more clearly under pressure. This knowledge can help you have a better, more productive experience.