

Management, Change, Strategy and Positive Leadership
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Wiley C. Davi
Duncan H. Spelman

Leading with Uncommon Sense

Slowing Down, Looking Inward,
Taking Action

 Springer

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Wiley C. Davi
Bentley University
Waltham, MA, USA

Duncan H. Spelman
Bentley University
Waltham, MA, USA

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
	The Practice	4
	Pause	4
	Introspect	5
	Act	10
	Adopting a Learning Stance	10
	The Difficulty in Taking a Learning Stance	11
	Overview of the Book	12
	About this Book	14
	References	16
2	Pause	17
	An Uncommon Leadership Idea: Pause	17
	Pausing: Being Choiceful About Our Attention	19
	Resources for Pausing	20
	You're Not Alone	27
	Conclusion	28
	References	29
3	Introspect: Be Humble	31
	An Uncommon Leadership Idea: Be Humble	32
	The Power of a Picture: The Johari Window	32
	Who's in Control?	34
	Problems with Our Efficient Brains	36
	Building Capacity	41
	Resources for Humility Introspection	43
	You're Not Alone	46
	Conclusion	49
	References	49

4	Introspect: Be Emotional	51
	An Uncommon Leadership Idea: Be Emotional	52
	The Power of a Picture: The CBT Triangle	53
	What Do Emotions Do?	54
	Building Emotional Capacity	60
	Resources for Emotional Introspection	67
	You're Not Alone	73
	Conclusion	74
	References	74
5	Introspect: Be "Impolite"	77
	An Uncommon Leadership Idea: Be "Impolite"	79
	What Are Social Identities?	79
	Why Social Identities Matter	79
	Building Social Identity Capacity	90
	Resources for Impolite Introspection	99
	You're Not Alone	103
	Conclusion	104
	References	105
6	Introspect: Be Uncertain	109
	An Uncommon Leadership Idea: Be Uncertain	111
	The Power of a Picture: The Ladder of Inference	111
	Our Certain Brains	113
	Building Uncertainty Capacity	117
	Resources for Uncertainty Introspection	121
	You're Not Alone	126
	Conclusion	129
	References	130
7	Act	133
	The Need for Action	134
	Uncommon Principles for Action	136
	Conclusion	150
	References	151
8	Conclusion: Going Forward	153
	Developing Uncommon Habits	155
	How Habits Work	155
	Breaking Common-Sense Leadership Habits	158
	You're Not Alone	161
	Commencement	163
	Lucia's Case: Part 1	164
	Lucia's Case: Part 2	165

Lucia's Case: Part 3	166
Lucia's Case: Part 4	166
Good-bye.	167
References.	167
Index.	169

Chapter 1

Introduction



Common sense is what tells us the earth is flat.
—Albert Einstein

We, as leaders, face daunting challenges. Most days confront us with an impressive mix of issues with which to deal. Ideally, as leaders, we have many moments of satisfaction, even exhilaration, and if we do, we have earned them. Consider these two leaders, Marie and Brennan, trying their best to be effective in very different situations but, in these moments, feeling quite some distance from exhilaration.

Marie quickly closed the door to her office and collapsed into her chair. She felt awful—incompetent, embarrassed, and exposed. She had just wrapped up her first staff meeting in her new position as head of the department. As she replayed in her mind what now felt like a disaster, she realized that in her haste to respond like she thought a real leader would respond, she had gotten way out over her skis. She had given answers that suggested she had more information than she actually had, and she offered opinions that were premature at best and just plain wrong at worst.

Marie was not only new to her position but also new to playing any kind of formal leadership role. She was highly educated (a PhD), but when it came to being an official leader, she was operating from instinct and common sense. As she waded into her new responsibilities, she unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, tried to fit the image of a person who is comfortable with being a leader—decisive, rational, unemotional, fair, and certain.

Her “followers” were a mix of people, younger and older, high status and low status in the organization, and expert in a wide variety of fields. She especially wanted the old heads in the group to see that she was up to the job.

One specific goal she originally had as she assumed the leadership position was to make sure her nontraditional gender appearance and identity would not affect her ability to lead. Now, as she brooded about her first public performance as department head, she was laughing at herself for thinking that she could be a genderless leader. A few department members had made comments after the meeting that demonstrated that her gender identity was far from a nonissue—one was an expression

of excitement that she was in a position of authority and the other a snarky observation about whether she would be too narrowly focused on who people are rather than what they can do.

Marie was seriously doubting whether she was cut out for a leadership position.

Brennan's circumstances were quite different from Marie's. He had had significant academic training in leadership and management and had been in his leadership position for several years. For the most part, he felt good about how he had functioned in the role, and he had received very positive feedback from both the people in his department and his bosses.

Yet he found himself reeling during a one-on-one conversation with a member of his department. The person had arrived at Brennan's door unannounced and clearly upset. He was extremely unhappy with the assignments he had been given by Brennan and proceeded in full-attack mode. Before he knew it, Brennan was embroiled in a very hot interaction with charges and countercharges flying. As his visitor stomped out of the door, Brennan could feel his pulse racing and his adrenaline pumping. He couldn't really remember much of what he or his coworker had said.

As he calmed down, he checked his email and found an alarming message. A woman of color in a different part of the organization, for whom Brennan, as a white man, had advocated very strongly with an upper-level manager, had sent a flaming memo to several key people in the organization, making unfounded accusations and displaying a total lack of respect. Brennan realized that, unfortunately, this was not the first time she had done this.

Brennan found himself wondering when he had forgotten how to be a leader. Here he was, stumbling and ineffective.

As the authors of this book on leadership, we are very much engaged ourselves in the search for solutions to the puzzles that we face as leaders. Marie is actually Wiley, early in her leadership career; Brennan is Duncan struggling to regain his balance. (Please don't tell anybody!)

Wiley was attempting to use what we call "common-sense" leadership as she took on her new responsibilities. Common-sense approaches are based on popular wisdom about how leaders need to behave and maybe even on some of the techniques that are presented in programs like those in which we teach. Typical common-sense leadership involves doing it now, being strong and decisive, not getting emotional, keeping social identities out of the picture, and projecting certainty.

Many of the leaders who capture our imagination through popular culture embody elements of common-sense leadership—the superhero for her ability to swoop in at the moment of crisis and rescue the victim; the NFL quarterback who maintains composure as 300-pound defenders attack from all sides; the fair and sensitive boss who during your orientation urges you *not* to pay attention to people's race, religion, or gender but rather to "treat everyone the same"; and the military leader in the war room making life-and-death decisions without self-doubt.

However, we do not live our lives as superheroes, NFL quarterbacks, or war-room decision-makers. Common-sense approaches to leadership very often do not result in the outcomes we seek or help us avoid sleepless nights.

Leading with Uncommon Sense offers a different approach: slowing down, engaging with our emotions, paying close attention to social identities, and embracing complexity. This style of leadership is less evident in the flow of everyday life because many of its most important aspects involve interior work by the leader—looking inward and examining self rather than focusing on influencing others.

For example, because we're not superheroes, we need to proceed carefully and follow the advice of a CFO in one of our executive education workshops who said, "I wish I held my decisions more lightly because I've come to realize how much I don't know." For those of us who are not NFL quarterbacks, rather than being focused on maintaining our composure, we are well served by stepping back and examining our emotions. Rather than trying to keep any discussion of our social identities out of the workplace, we can follow the lead of the boss who explicitly uses words like "white," "gay," and/or "Muslim" to bring into awareness how our social identities operate at work. Should we face life-and-death decisions (and even if we don't), our model should be leaders who consider multiple perspectives and question their own certainties. Leading with uncommon sense is based on a more complex understanding of leadership and is based on thinking about how we think and carefully observing how our brains work.

We do not pretend that leading with uncommon sense is easy. In the example above, Duncan (Brennan) thought he was following many of the tenets that we will describe in this book. Even though he believed in engaging with his emotions rather than suppressing them, he was not able in this incident to use his emotions productively. His desire to pay attention to social identities, rather than act as if they don't exist, backfired when he supported a colleague based only on her social identities and did not carefully assess her capabilities.

The two examples from our own leadership histories may seem quite different from the challenges you face, but maybe some of these experiences are familiar:

- Tossing and turning in the middle of the night as you obsess about a difficult work situation.
- Replaying a conversation, wishing you had been able to say something very different.
- Trying to understand why a decision blew up in your face.
- Feeling overwhelmed by the volume and pace of the demands you must address.

And what about some of these thorny challenges?

- Giving feedback to underperforming employees.
- Managing your difficult boss.
- Navigating through the complexities of hiring.
- Supervising cross-functional task forces composed of members with very different worldviews.
- Mediating across powerful fault lines among people in your department.

Our hope is that the ideas we present here will speak to a wide variety of leaders, with a wide variety of backgrounds, seeking to succeed in a wide variety of leadership situations.

The Practice

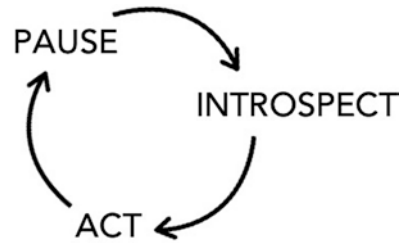
To help you lead with uncommon sense, we offer what we describe as a practice. Like any practice—meditation, yoga, or exercise—it’s important to engage in the practice on a regular basis in order for it to have the greatest effect on your leadership capacities. As French psychiatrist Christophe André observes:

We seem to imagine that, unlike our muscles, our brain has no need of training and can’t be developed. Yet we accept that our body needs training. We know that physical exercise develops our breathing and muscles, that appropriate food is good for our health, and so on. But we are less convinced, or perhaps less well informed, about the similar needs of our mind ... Our psychic abilities generally obey the rules of learning—the more we practice, the more progress we make [1].

Making such a commitment is not always easy. We keep in mind the introduction to meditation practice offered by an experienced teacher. He said, “I meditate for an hour a day unless things get really busy; then I meditate two hours.”

The practice involves three components: pause, introspect, and act (Fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1 Leading with uncommon sense: the practice



Pause

At the core of the practice is the need to slow down. As a leader, it often feels like we don’t have the time to pause. We feel compelled to produce answers to challenging questions immediately. Who should I promote to senior management? Why did our revenue numbers fall short of our predictions? How should I respond to an aggressive comment from a coworker? The commonly held image of the leader is someone who confidently answers such questions or handles difficult situations without flinching. Any brief moment of hesitation is often read as a sign of weakness, lack of clarity, or inadequate skills. Our fight or flight instinct often pushes us to act now rather than pause.

The practice we advocate highlights the benefits to you of pausing—both in the moment when reacting to a difficult situation and in a planned, proactive way to prepare for challenges and harvest learnings. We argue that pausing, rather than a sign of weakness, provides access to important information and greater insight.

Just as we pause a television show in order to grab a snack, we need to freeze frame our lives on a regular basis in order to access resources and gather information. In an age of multitasking, such advice seems counterintuitive. However, we argue that in order to be a competent leader, you need to be able to step back and survey the landscape of your thoughts and feelings.

You can pause in a variety of ways, for example, consciously taking a breath when things heat up, setting aside time to debrief at the end of meetings or important decision-making processes (ideally with trusted colleagues who will ask tough questions), building in time at the end of the day or week to reflect, using mindfulness practices such as meditation, or scheduling retreats for yourself or your team. We will explore these approaches and others in detail in Chap. 2.

Introspect

By pressing pause, we give ourselves time. This time could be used to collect more data about the situation, learn more about the other players involved, or seek out additional resources. We recommend that you use it first to look inward, that you introspect. Introspect is not a very commonly used word. It refers to the process of examining one's own thoughts or feelings (Google it!). Interestingly, there are very few words in our everyday vocabulary that capture this activity. This reflects how uncommon it is, especially for leaders, to look inward and carefully investigate what is happening with their thinking.

We have worked for years, now decades, with a wide variety of leaders—experienced and novice, young and old, and CEOs to leaders of student organizations. We have found that most of these leaders share the belief that a leader's most important task is to understand the people they are leading and with whom they are working. While it is certainly essential for leaders to appreciate and connect with their coworkers and colleagues, we are suggesting another focus of attention first. Introspecting as a component of leading with uncommon sense involves looking inward, examining oneself before attempting to figure out the other. In other words, we recommend doing your intrapersonal work in the service of becoming more interpersonally effective. We contend that efforts to understand others without understanding yourself are destined to produce partial success at best.

Common Traps and Tools to Avoid Them

Looking inward provides the opportunity to detect and avoid traps that we as humans commonly encounter. The traps are aspects of our thinking that routinely get us into trouble, specifically:

1. We frequently fail to recognize how much of our brain's activity is out of our control.

2. We resist listening to what our emotions are telling us.
3. We often don't appreciate the deep importance of identity differences like race, gender, age, etc.
4. We fail to notice how we oversimplify in our desire for certainty.

Questions and Reminders

Leading with Uncommon Sense provides four questions and four reminders for leaders to use during the introspect process with the aim of avoiding these common traps. The four questions that we urge leaders to ask themselves to bring these dangers into relief are:

1. What is out of my awareness?
2. What are my emotions telling me?
3. Am I neglecting identity differences?
4. Am I too sure?

And the four reminders are:

1. Be humble (because so much is out of our awareness and control).
2. Be emotional (because our emotions provide important information and cannot be suppressed).
3. Be "impolite" (because we are often taught that it is not polite to notice race or religion or other identity differences, but ignoring our own and other people's differences causes us to miss problems and to squander resources).
4. Be uncertain (because if we're too certain, we've probably oversimplified).

The questions and reminders are two routes to the same destination—leading with uncommon sense. Individuals may use them based on personal style or the demands of a particular situation, but they offer multiple defenses against falling into thinking traps that reduce our leadership effectiveness. Let's look at the introspect questions and reminders in a little more detail (Fig. 1.2).

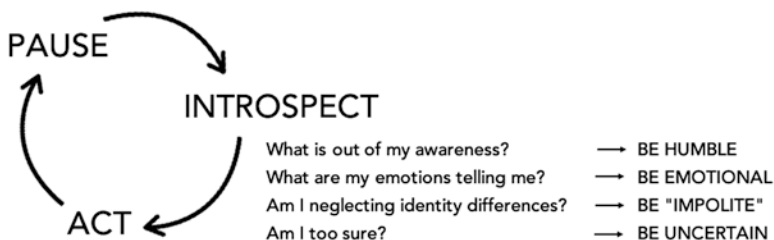


Fig. 1.2 Leading with uncommon sense: questions and reminders

Chapter 4

Introspect: Be Emotional



*I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions.
I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.
—Oscar Wilde*

In the spring of 2018, Emma Gonzalez emerged as one of the most compelling leaders among the group of students from Parkland, Florida, who survived the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. She and her schoolmates sparked a national movement focused on stopping the wave of gun violence in the United States. Gonzalez was 18 years old, Cuban-American, and out about her bisexuality—and she was well-known for her shaved head [1]. While not necessarily fitting the traditional image of a leader, she demonstrated a powerful capacity to access and communicate her emotions as she influenced literally millions of people.

While we do not know much about the methods Gonzalez used for other aspects of leadership, we have evidence of her uncommon approach to leading through her public remarks. Enacting the reminder around which this chapter is organized, Be Emotional, she used her feelings to inform and motivate her message to her listeners. Soon after the shooting, she delivered a tearful eulogy for the victims [2]. Her speech at a rally in Washington, D.C., about a month later became one of the best-known public addresses in recent history. During the 6 minutes that she appeared before the crowd—which she explained was the time it took the gunman to kill 17 people in her school—she remained totally silent for more than 4 minutes, an eternity in a speech before hundreds of thousands of people. During the silence, she lifted her eyes and stared into the distance, allowing tears to run down her face. She offered what *The New Yorker* described as a “potent combination of composure and fury.” [3]

An Uncommon Leadership Idea: Be Emotional

Gonzalez's unique presentation grew directly from the profound emotions she was feeling about the loss of her schoolmates and teachers. By tapping those emotions, she touched and inspired millions of people who shared the silence with her. The common trap that we fall into as humans is to resist listening to what our emotions are telling us. This chapter argues that effective leadership depends on our accessing, understanding, and using our emotions rather than following the common-sense rule of suppressing or avoiding our feelings.

The common-sense notion about emotions has deep roots. Beginning at least as far back as Plato, reason and emotion have been seen as separate aspects of human functioning with the affective realm often viewed as primitive, animalistic, and dangerous [4, p. 111]. As a result, many of us believe, consciously or not, that it is actually wrong to have feelings [5, p. 91, 95]. Only relatively recently has there been broader recognition that there is an indispensable collaboration between feeling and thinking and that emotions are an essential aspect of effective relationship building, decision-making, and other key human processes [6].

It is still common to hear implicit or explicit calls for emotions to be excluded, repressed, or controlled in order to allow logic and reason to achieve optimal results. Think how often you have been in a meeting when the leader has intervened to say, "Let's not get emotional—let's stay on track." Many people continue to presume that proper thinking is affectless [7].

Our social identities (gender, race, religion, age, etc.) are an important factor in how other people and we ourselves react to our expression of emotions. For example, showing feelings other than those related to anger has traditionally been labeled as feminine, a significant reason for many men to avoid exhibiting such emotions [8]. What's more, women attempting to be seen as credible in leadership positions will often steer clear of revealing their non-angry feelings because they know leadership has customarily been associated with masculinity. If women express anger, they are usually criticized or punished [9]. And think about the dangers for African-American or Arab men of expressing anger [10]. We will explore the complexities of social identities and emotions in the next chapter.

While feelings are neither universally beneficial nor universally disruptive, we ignore or dismiss them at our peril [11, p. 11]. Unexpressed feelings can diminish our ability to listen and contaminate our communication. Feelings are too powerful to remain bottled up [12]. They will express themselves either surreptitiously or explosively [5]. Our lives and sensibilities are impoverished when we exercise hyper-control or overprotect ourselves from our feelings [13, p. 68, 71, 72, 75].

As in the previous chapter, the focus in this chapter is on how to best use the time and attention you gain by pausing. We recommend using that time and attention to

introspect, to examine your own thoughts and feelings. In Chap. 3, the introspect question was “What is out of my awareness?” and the reminder was to be humble. In this chapter, we propose that after pausing you also ask yourself, “What are my emotions telling me?” You might remind yourself to be emotional. By asking yourself this question and following this reminder, you can reduce the frequency with which you fall into the common trap of not listening to what your emotions may be saying.

Emotions provide crucial information, so bringing them into our awareness whenever possible is key [14]. However, emotions do not provide certain answers, and our interpretations of what our feelings are telling us need to be held lightly (just as we recommended in the previous chapter about our perceptions, memories, and decisions). The relationship between our feelings and our thinking is neither simple nor straightforward [15]. Nonetheless, listening to our emotions is a central component of leading with uncommon sense (Fig. 4.1).

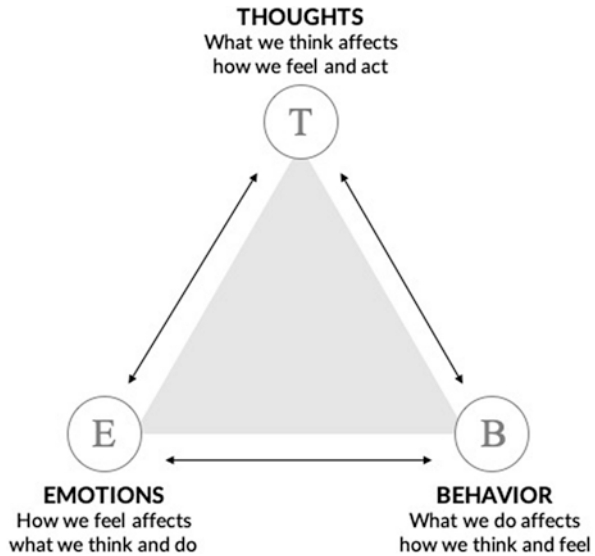


Fig. 4.1 The practice: be emotional

The Power of a Picture: The CBT Triangle

In Chap. 3, as we explored how to be humble, we presented the Johari Window, suggesting that sometimes a conceptual model, especially if it can be captured visually, can be a useful aid. For the reminder be emotional, we offer the CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) Triangle as such a model (see Fig. 4.2). The CBT Triangle can help us remember the inevitable connections among our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors and, therefore, prompt us to engage with our emotions rather than suppress them or believe our conscious thoughts and remembered behaviors are the whole story. Just as we recommended placing a copy of the Johari Window in a discrete spot or sending yourself a monthly email with it, it could be valuable to put the Triangle in your view to cue yourself to be emotional.

Fig. 4.2 The CBT Triangle



What Do Emotions Do?

Emotions make us do things, as the name suggests (remove the first letter from the word). They motivate our remarkable achievements, incite us to try again when we fail, keep us safe from potential harm, urge us to accomplish rewarding and beneficial outcomes, and compel us to cultivate social and romantic relationships. [16, p. 147]

It's curious that emotions often have such a bad name. Maybe their power to do all of what Berkeley sleep researcher Matthew Walker outlines above, and more, scares us. When we take a moment to step back and consider all of what emotions contribute to our lives, we realize that we wouldn't be safe, smart, effective, or human without them. Just as the unconscious functioning of our brains is essential (as we discussed in the previous chapter), our lives depend on emotions. They make living worthwhile and possible. Take emotions out of our lives, and we would be not only robotic but also incapable of making decisions [17].

Emotions play a central role in protecting us from danger, a capacity developed over centuries of evolution. Our survival as a species has depended on our ancestors having their emotional antennae up constantly [12]. Surrounded by deadly predators, natural disasters, and countless other life-threatening forces, early humans needed to rely on their emotional instincts to thrive and reproduce. The alertness we feel when walking alone at night, compensating for the reduced visual information available to us and the security of other people, makes us ready to deal with threats that may come at us. Our emotions signal us to jump out of the path of a vehicle speeding toward us. Consider the phenomenon of hysterical strength, as demonstrated when people have rescued loved ones from such calamities as being trapped under a car that has fallen off a jack. All these moments show the life-saving function of our feelings.

Emotions are so powerful that there is evidence that people can die of heartache. Research published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* reveals that “stress-

induced cardiomyopathy,” or what we commonly refer to as having a “broken heart,” is quite real [18]. The study describes the cases of 19 patients, with no prior history of coronary disease, suffering from heart failure precipitated by emotional stress. Similarly, in a study published in *Epidemiology*, scientists show a correlation between hopelessness and heart disease [19].

Of course, feelings of happiness, joy, and fulfillment are another essential aspect of life. We had the pleasure of working for a boss who fostered positive emotions in the workplace by focusing on accomplishments and injecting enthusiasm. He was wise enough to recognize that difficult emotions must also be recognized and managed, but he counteracted the unhappy dynamics that infect too many jobs and make it unpleasant to go to work. He was a jolly, challenging, and supportive leader.

Emotions Shape Our Perceptions and Experiences

In addition to the crucial role of emotions in our physical and psychological well-being, our feelings shape our experiences and perceptions, provide us with important information, and are essential for us to make decisions [20]. Each of these functions is of particular significance to leaders.

In many cases, emotions are a result of or reaction to something we have experienced. In a minute, we will consider the importance of such emotional reactions for leaders’ decision-making. However, emotions can also shape other key aspects of our lives as leaders—our perceptions, our experiences, and our understanding of those experiences [20]. As renowned psychologist Joseph Forgas observes, “affect is not an incidental, but an inseparable, part of how we see and represent the world around us; how we select, store, and retrieve information; and how we use stored knowledge structures in the performance of cognitive tasks.” [11]

Emotions can be thought of as the first screen to all information we receive [12]. Our feelings can have an important impact on how we actually take in information; our emotions affect our facial expressions, which, in turn, influence our perceptions. For example, when we are surprised, our eyes expand, which widens our field of vision. When we experience fear, our visual perception is enhanced [21].

Beyond this immediate, physical effect on what we perceive, emotions can powerfully affect our experiences of the world. We have had the pleasure of traveling with students from our US university to Ghana as part of a course on leadership and interpersonal communication. Typically, when we exited the Accra airport terminal, a number of Ghanaians surrounded the students and very enthusiastically offered to help them with their bags and give them a ride in their taxis. For many of the students, this experience was quite startling and shaped their general perceptions of Ghanaians.

We discovered, in debriefing this experience with the class, that many students thought Ghanaians were untrustworthy. What we knew, from our previous trips to Ghana, to be entrepreneurs looking for customers, the students took to be thieves trying to take advantage of them. In our conversations, one student said that she had never had anyone be so bold as to put his hand on the handle of her suitcase like that. She had been in airports where taxi drivers tried to encourage you to choose them, but she was “frightened” by one man’s hands on her personal effects. The impact of

this experience on the students was particularly intense for our white students (the majority of the group), many of whom were on the ground in a predominantly black country for the first time. The students' emotions were raised by the initial experience, and, in turn, those emotions shaped how the students began to experience and understand the social setting in which they found themselves.

Emotions Are Essential in Decision-Making

We cannot make decisions without emotions [22, p. 129]. They are often not just a useful factor but an *essential* factor to guide our behavioral choices [23]. This may seem like a very strong statement and inconsistent with our life experiences. However, research on people who have suffered damage to parts of their brains that are key to the processing of emotions demonstrates that these unfortunate individuals have profound difficulty making decisions, including about such seemingly simple issues as which restaurant to pick for dinner [24]. The impact on their lives is devastating. They perceive all options as equally good and, thus, cannot make a choice [25].

Emotions do not emerge only in reaction to a current provocation. They happen because something of importance to us is occurring, either a new event or one that reminds us of previous experiences [26]. We remember not only the facts of our life experiences but also the related feelings—whether we enjoyed the person or task or whether the food or the music was good or bad. When we experience an emotion, it often is reminding us of previous experiences that resemble this moment, and our feelings encourage us to pursue the opportunity or escape. They contain essential information. Emotions can contain wisdom developed over time about what we like or don't like and what is rewarding or punishing for us [27]. Without emotions, we cannot choose [4]. Ignoring our emotions makes us less smart and less satisfied.

Most, if not all, of us have had the experience of sitting in a meeting and realizing that we have a knot in our stomach or our heart is beating rapidly or our breathing is fast. Interestingly, these emotional responses may have actually affected our behavior and decision-making even before we became consciously aware of them [28]. Frequently, we ignore these emotional signals, at least consciously, for some time before we begin to pay attention and then ask ourselves what's wrong and why we're feeling as we are. Leading with uncommon sense involves noticing such warnings earlier and earlier and asking, "What are my emotions telling me?" We are not looking for a single, right answer to that question; emotions are complex, but we investigate what important information our emotions contain.

How Do Emotions Work?

Thinkers and scholars have investigated the dynamics of emotions for decades, if not centuries or millennia. We will not attempt to summarize or explain this rich and fascinating body of work. We will, however, highlight a few aspects of how emotions work that are particularly relevant to leaders.