

# I Think, Therefore I Am? Not Entirely. *The Role of Emotions in the Workplace*

By Melinda Guillemette

- A senior manager silently stew. He ignores emails and phone calls and fails to acknowledge even the warmest greeting. No one really knows why; they simply avoid him and discuss among themselves what the problem could be.
- An employee to whom you are delivering a mediocre review cries throughout the meeting. Both you and the employee feel lousy the rest of the day.
- Two members on the audit team for your biggest client will not stop arguing. The client calls you to find out what you were thinking when you sent these people to her office.

Different scenarios, same driving force: *emotions*.

Ah, yes, emotions. Those things Boomers have suppressed since the 1960s. Having consigned that decade to fuzzy memory, we Boomers have been building successful practices, making money, and doing good work all of our adult lives.

We have also been suffering. Obesity, alcohol abuse, divorce, and estrangement from our children have been long-running narratives. Our firms suffer from nasty partner disputes, regular employee turnover, and daily tension among certain individuals. The result is often lost productivity and profitability. Ultimately, though, something more important is lost: happiness.

## A tough reputation, duly earned

Until recently, emotions in CPA firms were mostly ignored. The rational Cartesian axiom, *I think, therefore I am*, ruled, and those who exhibited emotion were considered weak. According to Bobbi Hayes, Partner-in-Charge of Accounting & Consulting Group LLP's Albuquerque office, "The CPA profession has long been a bastion of the intellectual: being smart, being technically competent. We have believed for a long time that intellect solves problems, not emotion." Ms. Hayes adds that she knows many CPAs who "gag" on the concept of

dealing with staff on a personal and emotional level.

Ignoring emotions has contributed to a tough reputation for CPA firms as sweatshops, where constant criticism, partner infighting, and poor management often prevail. Aware of this reputation, firms have spent money, time, and energy instituting processes designed to improve their cultures. Committees are created, meetings are convened, and reports are issued. Somehow, though, the link between emotion and culture is lost in all the planning. The good news is that a few firms are directing their energy to connect emotion and culture constructively.

## What's happening now: Thought leaders in action

The link between culture and emotion is being consciously tended by progressive firms. According to Kenneth Guidry, President of Pannell Kerr Forster of Texas, P.C., "All organizations have a culture, whether

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they want one or not. Acknowledging the impact that emotions have in your culture allows you to take steps to craft a culture of your choosing."

Guidry and his colleagues try to attract team members who will actively engage with the firm by understanding its core values, respecting themselves and each other, and making a positive contribution to PKF's culture. He states, "We recognize that we hire the whole person, not just the person who shows up for work, but also the person who is dealing with positive and negative factors in their lives outside of the workplace."

The Millennial generation has brought about many changes in the workplace, and accounting for peoples' emotions is no exception. Partners are in the process of transitioning to this new way of thinking in dealing with their staff. For her part, Bobbi Hayes has worked hard to understand how younger team members think and communicate. "This is a generation that has been

raised to believe that their feelings matter and that expressing how they feel is a right of communication,” she says.

This new generation of professionals is forcing leaders to deal constructively with team members by focusing on their emotions, as well as their work skills. For too long, firms have tolerated unproductive behavior, in part because they failed to understand the emotional drivers involved. By shining a light on communication and self-expression, Millennials are bringing important issues to the table.

The need to understand how emotions manifest at work and to deal with them appropriately has become vital to productivity. According to Andy Armanino, Managing Partner of Armanino McKenna LLP, “Just acknowledging emotion isn’t enough. You have to work with it. We do both. We acknowledge emotions, which are closely linked to personality types, and we act on that knowledge.”

### **Moving forward by feeling your way**

A strong, positive, trusting culture is one that accepts all professionals as emotional human beings. If you want such a culture, the best agent of change is you. However, reading about creating a culture and holding endless meetings on the subject will not help you get there. You will be more likely to succeed by simply observing and participating in your firm’s emotional life. Following are seven tactics to help you begin:

1. *Be aware of your own emotions and how you are projecting them every minute.* Understand that you are being observed by team members carefully, and they will model their behavior after you. As a leader, always strive to be authentic, but at the same time, do not indulge in your own negativity. Kenneth Guidry adds, “I don’t believe you can be an effective leader unless you possess self awareness. This allows you to understand your behaviors/emotions and the influence they have on other people’s behaviors and impression of you and the organization.”
2. *Accept that, as a leader, it is your job to express optimism whenever possible.* When you cannot show optimism, step away from public view and take time for yourself, even if it is only a few minutes. Breathe deeply and regain your emotional balance.
3. *Don’t fear the tears.* While many of us can control our own emotions, we find it very uncomfortable when others get weepy. When they do, don’t shut down.

These savvy and successful leaders of CPA firms generously shared their thoughts for this article:

*Andy Armanino, Managing Partner of Armanino McKenna LLP, headquartered in San Ramon, California. Mr. McKenna led a period of tremendous growth in which his firm went from about \$24 million in annual revenue and about 100 employees to more than \$75 million in revenue and nearly 300 employees. The firm is currently the 39th largest in the nation and is the largest accounting and business consulting firm based in California.*

*Kenneth Guidry, CPA, is the President of Pannell Kerr Forster of Texas, P.C. (PKF Texas), located in Houston, Texas. Under Mr. Guidry’s leadership, PKF Texas has seen tremendous growth as one of the fastest growing firms in the Southwest. In addition, it has been recognized by numerous organizations for outstanding culture and innovation. Mr. Guidry is a frequent consultant and has served as a panelist on firm management and been quoted by several national and regional publications and trade journals on firm culture and business development. PKF Texas is the largest locally owned accounting firm in Houston and is a member of the Leading Edge Alliance, PKF International and Partner Power International.*

*R.A. Bobbi Hayes, Partner in Charge of the Albuquerque office of Accounting & Consulting Group, LLP, works extensively with business clients on strategic development and the importance of corporate culture. She is a CPA, CITP, CFF, CFE and CCIFP. Accounting & Consulting Group, LLP is a seven-office firm based in New Mexico and West Texas. It is one of the most rapidly growing firms in the Southwest and is the second largest locally owned accounting firm in New Mexico.*

- Offer a tissue and keep communicating. Don't dwell on it, but don't judge it, either.
4. *Defuse anger by acknowledging it.* No true resolution can be achieved unless everyone has the opportunity to express themselves. If the other person does not address the anger, you must. Leaving a conflict unacknowledged only allows it to fester. It robs productivity, and happiness not solely from those individuals involved in the conflict, but from everyone with whom it is discussed.
  5. *Recruit and hire for the emotional traits that fit with and lift up your culture.* Armanino McKenna goes about this systematically with a personality inventory given to each new hire. The inventory accomplishes several things. According to Armanino, "First, it takes away the stigma that can be associated with how different individuals react to their peers and certain issues. Second, it allows us to leverage an employee's emotional strengths and neutralize weaknesses. It also allows us to pair personality types that are more likely to fit in terms of interpersonal dynamics."
  6. *Make communication skills part of your firm's teaching program across all levels.* Strong communication skills enable people to respond appropriately, even under pressure. When people understand that words can be weapons or they can be tools,

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generally they will choose to use them as tools. They certainly will make a greater effort if your culture requires it.

7. *Feel joy in and gratitude for your life.* That is the strongest possible foundation for understanding and acceptance of others' emotions, whether positive or negative.

CPA firms are clearly evolving. The exclusively rational view of high utilization, realization, and profitability as the only accepted determinants of success

are giving way to broader thinking. Progressive leaders know that recognizing, understanding, and accepting the emotional elements of working life contributes to individual and organizational growth, longevity, and happiness. They know that "I think, therefore I am" is only half of the story, and it is only rational to acknowledge the role of emotion in business life.

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**About the author:** Melinda Guillemette is the owner of Melinda Motivates, located in Corrales, New Mexico. She helps leaders and other mortals in CPA firms to communicate effectively, both with internal and external audiences. Melinda is a 2004 inductee to the Association for Accounting Marketing's Hall of Fame, and a contributing author to the 2010 AICPA publication, *Bull's-Eye! The Ultimate How-To Marketing & Sales Guide for CPAs*. Learn more at [melindamotivates.com](http://melindamotivates.com). ✦

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