

This piece was written for a local newspaper, *The Olympian* while serving as a member of the Diversity Panel from 2007 through 2008.

Emotions are a powerful source of communication

By David Whitfield | For The Olympian • Published October 17, 2008

How can we help those of us who become emotional while discussing diversity?

The best way I know is through emotional intelligence, an intentional, conscious process enabling us to gain understanding and mastery over our emotions. Emotional intelligence also is about feeling, managing, and effectively applying the power of emotions as a source of human energy. Often we think of emotions as negative and to be avoided. How many times have we avoided co-workers or colleagues because we decided they were too emotional?

Proponents of emotional intelligence and diversity assert that "If we could tap the power of human emotions we'd never run out of energy." Though emotions can bring magic or misery, consider what happens if we don't pay attention to them. We usually act them out.

I believe emotions are a very important source of information. We can try to hide them, but we are not as good as we think. Major decisions, to be effective, tend to incorporate emotions. And though universal emotions exist, different cultures display them differently.

So if emotions provide the essential spark that energizes life and work, then they become a powerful source of motivation, communication and relationship building in the community and the diverse workplace.

When staff members are emotional, supervisors and managers can demonstrate emotional intelligence by asking them open-ended questions, listening closely and with empathy, rather than avoiding them. When we ignore emotions, human relations can go awry. Often, staff members work on each other and not on what they are paid to. If they are working on each other more than they are on their jobs, the consequences can be costly in lost production, low morale, high turnover and possible litigation.

Emotional intelligence also suggests we check our self-talk, or what I call prattle, meaning conversations or stories we create in our head about those who differ from us, especially when we don't know them, or reasons for their behavior. We create stories about them, resulting in poor judgment.

We can avoid this by questioning our thinking: Why am I thinking that way about Mrs. X., or Mr. Y? Thus, we become more curious, less judgmental and accountable for our reactions to others.

A lack of emotional intelligence can be embarrassing, hurtful and damaging in the workplace, our communities or places where we lack knowledge of customs, cultures and traditions. It can also cause difficulty when we remain ignorant.

For example, the citizen in Ohio who said, "I cannot vote for that black boy," referring to Sen. Barack Obama, showed an acute lack of emotional intelligence — unaware of her "stuff" about someone different from her. One's political preferences notwithstanding, he is a senator and a contributor to society. To refer to him as a "black boy" is at a minimum, antediluvian, disrespectful and myopic thinking. This statement also says much more about the citizen's lack of emotional intelligence and less about the senator.

Finally, emotional intelligence suggests that it's OK to have our feelings and don't be our feelings, meaning choose our behavior and not allow our behavior to choose us.

