

## **Emotions in Project Management**

**Lev Virine, Ph.D., P.Eng.; Michael Trumper;  
and Eugenia Virine, PMP**

Intaver Institute Inc.

In this paper we will learn about how decisions in project management are affected by our emotions. People make choices under the influence of emotions all the time. Emotions can lead to mental mistakes; mental mistakes lead to low quality decisions. We will not attempt a comprehensive review of human emotions; instead, we will explain why even the most emotionally intelligent people make irrational decisions when they find themselves in stressful situations. We will also provide few choice engineering ideas that will help you to mitigate the negative impact of emotions on your decisions in project management.

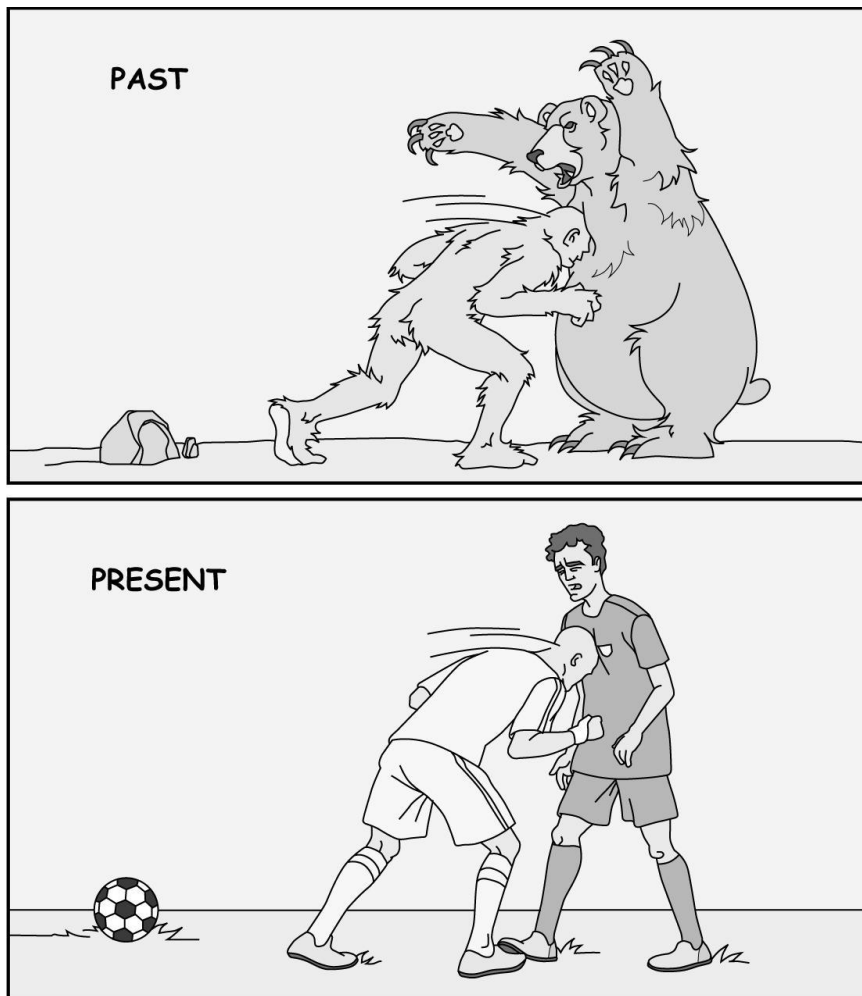
### **The headbutt felt around the world**

What was your most memorable moment of 2006 football World Cup in Germany? If you are like us, it was the moment during final match between France and Italy where France's captain, national hero, and talisman Zinedine Zidane, playing in his final match for France, was sent off in disgrace for giving Italy's Marco Materazzi's a Liverpool kiss to the chest - more commonly known as a head-butt - in retaliation to a series of verbal insults the Italian had barraged him with. Italy won 5–3 on penalties. Millions of his fans all around the world were left to wonder how such an experienced player as Zinedine Zidane was goaded into acting so recklessly. Though there was some insinuation that Materazzi had managed to go as low as mentioning Zidane's mother, it did not justify Zidane's actions.

We can imagine what happened to Zidane at this moment. It was extra time in perhaps the most important game of his career. France was on the verge of repeating as World Cup champions, an achievement that would place them in very rare company in the annals of soccer greats. It is in this type of environment, where the pressure to succeed is so great, that even seasoned performers find it very difficult to perform at their best. Strangely, the object that most affects their performance is not a tall foul mouthed Italian soccer star, or some other external force, it is a small organ located deep in our brains, the amygdala (Swanson and Petrovich 1998, Whalen and Phelps 2009). The amygdala is almond-shaped group of nuclei located deep within the medial temporal lobes of the brain. The primary purpose of the amygdala is the processing and memory of emotional reactions.

When people perceive danger or become involved in other situations which cause fear or anger, a signal is sent to amygdala, where an association with a memory of the stimuli is formed. The signal is then passed to other portions of the brain which triggers a response to the danger. This response can cause different symptoms: rapid heartbeat, increased respiration, stress-hormone release, and even temporary freezing. In addition, people's ability to process information rationally becomes very limited for a period of time. This period of irrationality can be just few seconds, a few minutes, or longer depending on the individual and situation. During this period of time, people will make decisions based on emotion rather than analysis. Essentially, during times of high stress, our amygdala sets off our instinctive defense mechanisms significantly faster than they can be shut down.

This mechanism was developed in the brains of our remote ancestors millions and millions of years ago and helped protect our predecessors from the many dangers they faced in the hostile environments in which they lived. Nowadays, the perceived threats in the environment are different, instead of a terrifying encounter with a large carnivore during the early Pleistocene, it may be a terrifying encounter with senior project manager. Regardless of the perceived threat, our reaction to danger remains the same. Perhaps the same process took over Zidane just before the infamous incident, when under increasing stress a cascade of signals from his amygdala overwhelmed Zidane's ability to think rationally and led to the delivery of the head-butt and his eventual ignominious dismissal from the match.



It is important to note, everybody from presidents to janitors, is susceptible to the same symptoms. If you happen to come across someone who is completely unaffected by emotions, there are two possible explanations: you are on the set of a Star Trek movie and are looking at an actor playing a Vulcan, or you have stumbled upon a corpse. This is not to deny that there are differences in individuals' ability to handle stress and act appropriately in stressful situations. However even for those people who are able to maintain the best control, they will eventually succumb to their own biology and start to make instinctive or irrational choices. Often this is triggered not by simple stimuli, as in a clearly defined threat, but in complex situations where the real threat to is themselves or, in the case of project managers, to their projects.

## **Our emotional choices often are not the best ones**

Pavel 1 was a Russian emperor from 1796 to 1801 and often made emotional choices. His foul moods and emotional nature is the stuff of legend. One day, as was the case on most days, he woke up in a bad mood. As he stood in his bedroom, he looked out the window with a view of the palace ground. As he surveyed his ground, he happened to spot a particularly unfortunate fellow, “Look at that person. He dares to walk near the palace without showing any sign of respect, he should at least take off his hat”, he pointed out to a few of his courtiers who were standing attentively about his royal person, looking for any chance to curry favor as was their custom. Upon hearing this, his attendants with intimate knowledge of Pavel’s emotional character, instantly issued the emperor’s decree that any and all subjects who passed by a palace must take off their hat in a show of respect to their sovereign. As it often happens in project management, publishing edicts or regulations and actually getting everyone to follow them two completely different things. To ensure everyone followed the new decree, the emperor’s courtiers tasked the police with enforcing it, which they did by with stern language and judicious use of fists, boots, and whatever else brought about the desired behavior.

After a few months, the new project was deemed a complete success. Doffing their hats as a show of respect became a habit for the locals. As things would have it, Pavel was again looking out his windows, this time in a better mood. He happened to see one of his subjects removing his hat as he walked by the palace, puzzled since this seemed to be unusual behavior, he turned to his courtiers, “How strange,” he observed, “I just saw someone take off their hat as they walked by, has spring arrived early?” “But it is according to your wishes sire”, they replied. “I did not say such thing” said Pavel. Typically, like many of us, Pavel does not have a good memory of decisions made when we are emotional, often we cannot remember them at all. With this new understanding of their rulers’ wishes, his underlings quickly set out to repeal the previous decree, but predictably undoing the decree proved as difficult as imposing it in the first place and the policemen were again sent out to enforce the new/old regulation: everyone must now keep their hat on as they passed by the palace.

Many project managers follow Pavel’s footsteps and make emotional decisions. If something is wrong with a project, instead of taking the time to carefully analyze the underlying cause, they prefer to act quickly. Often applying the scattershot technique when applying blame, if you throw enough around, some of it will stick. Bugs in the software? It is QA fault. If didn’t persist on testing so much, there would not be as many bugs in the code. If we reduce QA resources, we will have fewer issues to fix and we can meet our product launch date. Then they ask themselves why they did not come up with this simple, cost saving solution before.

Here is a true story. A Canadian high tech company designed small TV sets to be installed in front of each exercise machine in fitness clubs. Each set had a screen and keypad to change channels, volume and so on. Originally, all the keypads were supposed to use bubbly buttons, sticking out from the keypad. One day the company CEO, a businessman, not a project manager or hardware engineer, demonstrated the device to somebody very influential in the fitness industry. This person had read somewhere about an experiment that demonstrated that bubbly buttons were less durable than flat buttons. Apparently, somebody had pressed on a bubbly button one million times and it stopped working and in addition made the claim that flat buttons were more durable. On that same day, the CEO went back to his office and requested a redesign of the keypad with flat buttons. Interestingly, nobody, including the CEO and engineers, knew anything about the actual experiment with the one million button clicks. But it was the CEO’s

order and the engineers started the new development. Later on when whole project was delayed, the CEO discovered that the reason was his own request to re-design a keypad. As emperor Pavel I, the CEO was quite surprised. He asked why the engineers did not provide him with cost and duration estimates. It is happened, the CEO was told that the redesign and changing of suppliers would means changes to the project cost and schedule. But he was so emotional on that day that he was unable to use or recall any of the advice or estimates any his project team had provided.

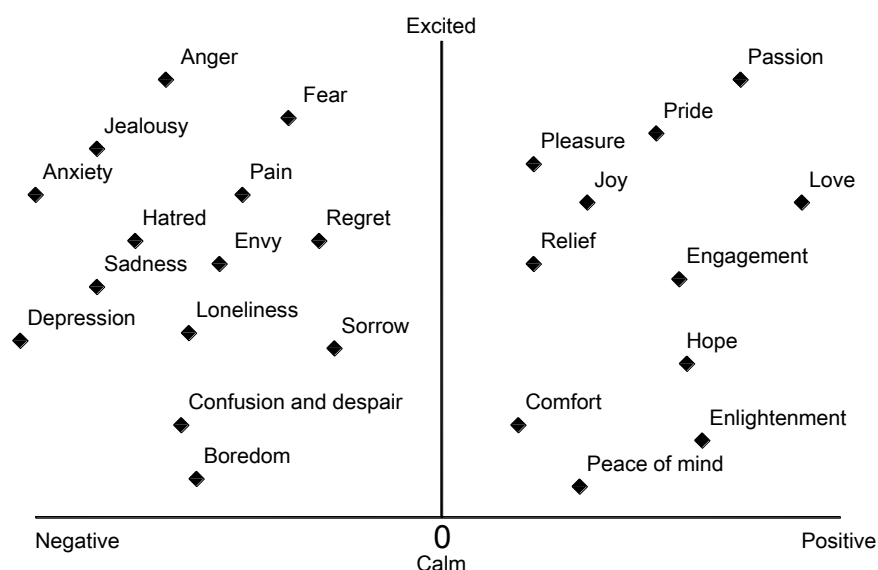
If you find that people are around you are making decisions that seem stupid, irrational, counterproductive (you name it), there is a good chance that it is because of their emotions. Getting angry with them will not help and may exacerbate the issue. Remember that given time, their emotions will return to a normal state and at that time they may see in retrospect that their actions were rash and they have the option to change their decisions.

### Emotional Intelligence

So how can we minimize the effect of emotions on our project management decisions? In other words, how can we be emotionally intelligent so that we can manage our own and our team's emotions. These are a number of different models of emotional intelligence. One of them was offered by Daniel Goleman (Goleman 2006) and adopted for project management by Anthony Mercino (Mercino 2007). This emotional intelligence model has five domains:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship management
5. Team leadership

First of all, we need to identify these emotions (Baucells and Sarin 2008). It is important to note that mental mistakes and consequent wrong decisions are caused not only by negative emotions, but also positive ones, such as passion or love. As we all know, people in love can be very delusional and are prone to irrational choices.



You also need to recognize the impact of emotions on our intuitive or “gut feeling” decisions. This is called self-awareness. You are probably aware that if you are angry, you might say something that you wish you hadn’t. Therefore, you need to be able to control your emotions, this is called self-management. As a part of a social network, which in the case of a project is the project team, you must be able to recognize other people’s emotions. Finally, and perhaps the most difficult skills to master, you must learn how to manage other people’s emotions through relationship management and team leadership

Some people may be extremely intelligent (IQ), but at the same time have a low emotional intelligence. This explains why so many fraud artists are successful at separating normally intelligent people from their money. Various Ponzi schemes, real estate fraud, and other such criminal activities are successful because of the manner in which they manipulate our emotions.

In 2005, the Ig Nobel award in Literature was given to the Internet entrepreneurs of Nigeria, for distributing by e-mail a bold series of short stories, thus introducing millions of readers to a cast of rich characters - Barrister Jon A Mbeki Esq., General Sani Abacha, Mrs. Mariam Sanni Abacha, and others - each of whom requires just a small amount of expense money so as to obtain access to the great wealth to which they are entitled and which they would like to share with the kind person who assists them (Ig Nobel. 2010). In fact, the emails were written well enough that they were able to trigger one of the most powerful emotions: greed. Greed is a good example of an emotion that can cause a mental mistake, “If I send a little bit of money to Mrs. Mariam Sanni Abacha, I will be rich”. The thought of easy money may generate a very powerful image of a Palm Beach villa, or some other wealthy enclave in your mind. How do we know this, obviously the emails were successful; otherwise, these unappreciated literature gems would have long ago disappeared from our inboxes.

You may think that Mrs. Mariam Sanni Abacha – type events may not be applicable to project management: the case is too obvious and intelligent project managers would recognize it. But even in large projects, where detailed analysis should serve as a counterweight to our propensity for rash decision, project managers sometimes demonstrate very little emotional intelligence. In 2000, Apache, Beau Canada, and Murphy Oil announced a major discovery in Ladyfern gas field located in very remote North Eastern region of British Columbia, Canada. Major discoveries are rare in the mature Western Canada region. Ladyfern drew international attention because of huge production rates of test wells. The initial high production made the gas field’s economic potential seem extremely lucrative causing many gas producers to jump on the bandwagon. Land lease prices increased dramatically, construction of an expensive pipeline started. This area can be developed only during winter months when the roads are accessible. Therefore, in order to be first on the ground, some companies spent millions to deliver crews and equipment by helicopters. It was a real gold rush. Production from this field grew in 2001, but then fell sharply: Ladyfern was not as large as originally estimated and gas producers operating in this area incurred major losses (Andrews, 2009). While engineers and managers of oil companies are very intelligent people, it is the lack of emotional intelligence that leads them to Ladyfern type losses.

### **How to become emotionally intelligent: a choice engineering approach**

There are many self-help books that offer advice on how to manage your emotions: there are many professionals who specialize in helping people with emotional problems. Obviously



we cannot and do not want to compete with them; rather, our goal is to give you some basic ideas on how to avoid being subject to emotional errors that can affect your projects.

Since we cannot mandate anybody to become emotionally intelligent these are some non-intrusive ways to avoid decision-making while under the sway of emotions. They belong to the choice engineering principles:

**Cooling Period.** On October 19, 1987, a date also known as Black Monday, stock markets all over the global collapsed (Browning 2007). In particular, the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummeted 508 points, losing 22.6% of its value in one day. Interestingly, no definitive conclusions have been reached on the reasons behind the 1987 crash. One of the consequences of the 1987 crash was the introduction of a cooling period on the NYSE. This mandatory market shutdown is triggered whenever a large pre-defined market decline occurs during the trading day. This shut down is meant to inhibit the effect of investor's emotions. Typically, investors are driven by two strong emotions: greed and fear. Remember how the amygdala shuts down rational thought and people make decisions based on the mental mistakes that their emotions generate. The concept is to not allow people to make investment decisions for a period of time after a crisis situation. The same suggestion is very useful when we talk about self-management. If you are in a stressful situation, give yourself a timeout until your level of stress related hormones declines before you make any decisions. The old advice to count to 10 before you say anything turns out to be quite sound. But, it is easier said than done; deciding not to decide is also a decision, which you will have to do under stress.

**In a crisis, use predefined routines.** You have probably participated in a fire drill in your office. If you take a cruise, you will probably be asked to participate in a drill where you are familiarized with the life-saving procedures on the ship. All these drills are very simple: just walk to certain area when an alarm sounds. So why bother to practice? Unfortunately, during a real crisis, such as a fire, our ability to make rational choices will be impaired by emotions. If we can practice our routines that we will use during crisis, it should become automatic. When they become automatic, our decisions will be made based on memory which will have the mental images of the drills we practiced.

We are constantly involved in activities which can cause strong emotional responses. It is better to prepare to these types of activities in advance. For example, airport security procedures are not very pleasant: take off your coat, take off your shoes, remove your laptop, remove any metal from your pockets, place everything in the bins, keep the boarding pass in your hands, and walk through the metal detector. Moreover, this procedure has gradually become more and more complex. If you are not a frequent flyer and used to these inconveniences, you may find yourself stressed out. What could happen? You may forget your watch or phone at the security check. Worse, you may appear suspicious and attract unwanted attention and we all know where that leads. However, if you plan in advance by simply thinking about how many things you need to take out and place back, the chance that you may lose something will be reduced.

In project management this process is called risk response planning. Instead of panicking that defects that have been discovered close to a software release date and deciding to get rid of your QA team, it would be better to plan some time in advance to fix any bugs that are found late in the development cycle. Moreover, it is important that realistic buffers or contingencies for bug fixing are included in the baseline schedule as part of standard practices for all software development projects in organization.

**Talk it out.** Psychologists have found that one of the best responses to an emotional situation is to talk with someone. You do not even need to have a clear goal in mind, just the act of talking with another person reduce the level of stress related hormones and help you to starting thinking rationally again. Psychologists recommend different types of support groups in cases of crisis: when people talk with each other, it helps them to cope with their problems.

Unfortunately we often forget about this simple way to manage emotional situations in project management. Sales are significantly down and senior management is very upset. What do project manager often do? He or she sits in their office firing off e-mails, perhaps some of them containing irrational orders. What is a better solution? Simple, call a team meeting. First, the meeting itself will act as cooling down period that is necessary to reduce level of emotion. During this meeting, every member of team, even those who are not directly involved in the sales process should have their turn to express an opinion. The goal is not to make a decision at this time, but to allow emotions to cool off and help make rational decisions later.

## References

- Andrews G.S. 2009. *Canadian Professional Engineering and Geoscience: Practice and Ethics*. Fourth Edition. Nelson College Indigenous
- Baucells, M. and Sarin, R. K 2008. The Mathematics of Happiness. In *Proceedings of INFORMS Annual Meeting*, Washington DC, 2008, October 12-15
- Browning, E.S. 2007. Exorcising Ghosts of Octobers Past. *The Wall Street Journal*: October 15, 2009. pp. C1-C2. Available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB119239926667758592>. (accessed June 16, 2015).
- Goleman D. 2006. Emotional Intelligence. Why It Can Matter More Than IQ. 10th Anniversary Edition. Bantam
- Ig Nobel. 2015. Improbable Research: Research That Makes People Laugh, Available at: <http://www.ignobel.com>. (accessed June 16, 2015).
- Mercino A. 2007. *Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers: The People Skills You Need to Achieve Outstanding Results*. AMACOM
- Swanson L. W. and Petrovich G. D. 1998. What is the amygdala? *Trends in Neurosciences* 21 (8)
- Whalen P.J. (eds.) and Phelps E.A. (eds.) 2009. *The Human Amygdala*. The Guilford Press; 1 edition

## About the Authors



### **Lev Virine, PhD**

Intaver Institute  
Alberta, Canada



**Lev D. Virine**, Ph.D. has more than 25 years of experience as a structural engineer, software developer, and project manager. He has been involved in major projects performed by Fortune 500 companies and government agencies to establish effective decision analysis and risk management processes as well as to conduct risk analyses of complex projects. Lev's current research interests include the application of decision analysis and risk management to project management. He writes and speaks around the world on the decision analysis process, the psychology of judgment and decision-making and risk management. Lev can be contacted at [lvirine@intaver.com](mailto:lvirine@intaver.com)



### **Michael Trumper**

Intaver Institute  
Alberta, Canada



**Michael Trumper** has over 20 years' experience in communications, software design, and project risk and management. Michael is a partner at Intaver Institute Inc., a vendor of project risk management and analysis software. Michael has authored papers on quantitative methods in project estimation and risk analysis. He is a co-author of two books on project risk management and decision analysis. He has developed and delivered project risk analysis and management solutions to clients that include NASA, DOE, and Lockheed Martin.



### **Eugenia Virine, PMP**

Alberta, Canada



**Eugenia Virine**, PMP, is a senior manager for revenue development at Greyhound Canada. Over the past 12 years Eugenia has managed many complex projects in the areas of transportation and information technology. Her current research interests include project risk and decision analysis, project performance management, and project metrics. Eugenia holds B. Comm. degree from University of Calgary.