IN THE decade since Primal Leadership was first published, the world has changed in ways that make its message all the more timely. Leaders face ever-increasing pressures, including globalization and the economic roller coaster, the hyper-speed of evolving information technologies, the shortening of product life cycles, and the ratcheting up of competitive forces, to name just a few.

This whirlwind of change makes it more important than ever for leaders to be self-aware and composed, focused and high energy, empathic and motivating, collaborative and compelling—in short, resonant. A host of studies worldwide on emotions, emotional contagion, leader-follower relations, and coaching, as well as research on human behavior continue to confirm and clarify our understanding of why emotionally intelligent leaders get results. Our own research on brain imaging related to effective leaders also confirms what we proposed ten years ago.

That message has already shown its relevance to the million or so readers of Primal Leadership, in twenty-eight languages—a number that confirms the global appeal of emotionally intelligent leadership. And that appeal reaches beyond the business world. Our book is now used routinely in universities, business and
medical schools, other professional training programs, and by a growing legion of leadership coaches.

Part of our message is “leadership at all levels.” We each have spheres of influence where we lead, no matter our position or title. But the difficult reality so many organizations have faced in hard times has put leadership development on the back burner. Today, many people are seeking ways to develop their leadership skills on their own. Our work helps.


These books amplify the work of *Primal Leadership*, broadening its impact and adding to the toolkit of the thousands of individuals, coaches, and others who are applying its message in their own lives, work, and leadership.

In coming years we can expect increased interdependence—both within organizations and between them in new partnerships. And as the need increases to use resources more thoughtfully, efficiently, and with benign impacts, emotional and social intelligence will become even more critical to building and maintaining the working relationships needed to achieve these ends. The driving force in learning, adaptation, and change will continue to be resonant leadership and the personal renewal that accompanies it.

**Contacting the Authors**

This book represents an ongoing exploration into the role of emotional intelligence in leadership. We welcome reactions from our readers—thoughts, stories, questions. Though we are not always
able to respond to every e-mail, we enjoy hearing from (and always learn from) our readers.

To reach us via e-mail, use the following addresses:

Daniel Goleman: contact@danielgoleman.info
Annie McKee: amckee@teleosleaders.com
Richard Boyatzis: richard.boyatzis@case.edu
GREAT LEADERS move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions.

No matter what leaders set out to do—whether it’s creating strategy or mobilizing teams to action—their success depends on how they do it. Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should.

Consider, for example, a pivotal moment in a news division at the BBC, the British media giant. The division had been set up as an experiment, and while its 200 or so journalists and editors felt they had given their best, management had decided the division would have to close.¹
It didn’t help that the executive sent to deliver the decision to the assembled staff started off with a glowing account of how well rival operations were doing, and that he had just returned from a wonderful trip to Cannes. The news itself was bad enough, but the brusque, even contentious manner of the executive incited something beyond the expected frustration. People became enraged—not just at the management decision, but also at the bearer of the news himself. The atmosphere became so threatening, in fact, that it looked as though the executive might have to call security to usher him safely from the room.

The next day, another executive visited the same staff. He took a very different approach. He spoke from his heart about the crucial importance of journalism to the vibrancy of a society, and of the calling that had drawn them all to the field in the first place. He reminded them that no one goes into journalism to get rich—as a profession its finances have always been marginal, with job security ebbing and flowing with larger economic tides. And he invoked the passion, even the dedication, the journalists had for the service they offered. Finally, he wished them all well in getting on with their careers.

When this leader finished speaking, the staff cheered.

The difference between the leaders lay in the mood and tone with which they delivered their messages: One drove the group toward antagonism and hostility, the other toward optimism, even inspiration, in the face of difficulty. These two moments point to a hidden, but crucial, dimension in leadership—the emotional impact of what a leader says and does.

While most people recognize that a leader’s mood—and how he or she impacts the mood of others—plays a significant role in any organization, emotions are often seen as too personal or unquantifiable to talk about in a meaningful way. But research in the field of emotion has yielded keen insights into not only how to measure the impact of a leader’s emotions but also how the best leaders have found effective ways to understand and improve the way they handle their own and other people’s emotions. Understanding the powerful role of emotions in the workplace...
sets the best leaders apart from the rest—not just in tangibles such as better business results and the retention of talent, but also in the all-important intangibles, such as higher morale, motivation, and commitment.

The Primal Dimension

This emotional task of the leader is *primal*—that is, first—in two senses: It is both the original and the most important act of leadership.

Leaders have always played a primordial emotional role. No doubt humankind’s original leaders—whether tribal chieftains or shamanesses—earned their place in large part because their leadership was emotionally compelling. Throughout history and in cultures everywhere, the leader in any human group has been the one to whom others look for assurance and clarity when facing uncertainty or threat, or when there’s a job to be done. The leader acts as the group’s emotional guide.

In the modern organization, this primordial emotional task—though by now largely invisible—remains foremost among the many jobs of leadership: driving the collective emotions in a positive direction and clearing the smog created by toxic emotions. This task applies to leadership everywhere, from the boardroom to the shop floor.

Quite simply, in any human group the leader has maximal power to sway everyone’s emotions. If people’s emotions are pushed toward the range of enthusiasm, performance can soar; if people are driven toward rancor and anxiety, they will be thrown off stride. This indicates another important aspect of primal leadership: Its effects extend beyond ensuring that a job is well done. Followers also look to a leader for supportive emotional connection—for empathy. All leadership includes this primal dimension, for better or for worse. When leaders drive emotions positively, as was the case with the second executive at the BBC, they bring out everyone’s best. We call this effect *resonance*. When they drive
emotions negatively, as with the first executive, leaders spawn dissonance, undermining the emotional foundations that let people shine. Whether an organization withers or flourishes depends to a remarkable extent on the leaders’ effectiveness in this primal emotional dimension.

The key, of course, to making primal leadership work to everyone’s advantage lies in the leadership competencies of emotional intelligence: how leaders handle themselves and their relationships. Leaders who maximize the benefits of primal leadership drive the emotions of those they lead in the right direction.

How does all of this work? Recent studies of the brain reveal the neurological mechanisms of primal leadership and make clear just why emotional intelligence abilities are so crucial.

The Open Loop

The reason a leader’s manner—not just what he does, but how he does it—matters so much lies in the design of the human brain: what scientists have begun to call the open-loop nature of the limbic system, our emotional centers. A closed-loop system such as the circulatory system is self-regulating; what’s happening in the circulatory system of others around us does not impact our own system. An open-loop system depends largely on external sources to manage itself.

In other words, we rely on connections with other people for our own emotional stability. The open-loop limbic system was a winning design in evolution, no doubt, because it allows people to come to one another’s emotional rescue—enabling, for example, a mother to soothe her crying infant, or a lookout in a primate band to signal an instant alarm when he perceives a threat.

Despite the veneer of our advanced civilization, the open-loop principle still holds. Research in intensive care units has shown that the comforting presence of another person not only lowers the patient’s blood pressure, but also slows the secretion of fatty acids that block arteries. More dramatically, whereas three or more incidents of intense stress within a year (say, serious financial
trouble, being fired, or a divorce) triple the death rate in socially isolated middle-aged men, they have no impact whatsoever on the death rate of men who cultivate many close relationships.3

Scientists describe the open loop as “interpersonal limbic regulation,” whereby one person transmits signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms, and even immune function inside the body of another.4 That’s how couples who are in love are able to trigger in one another’s brains surges of oxytocin, which creates a pleasant, affectionate feeling. But in all aspects of social life, not just love relationships, our physiologies intermingle, our emotions automatically shifting into the register of the person we’re with. The open-loop design of the limbic system means that other people can change our very physiology—and so our emotions.

Even though the open loop is so much a part of our lives, we usually don’t notice the process itself. Scientists have captured this attunement of emotions in the laboratory by measuring the physiology—such as heart rate—of two people as they have a good conversation. As the conversation begins, their bodies each operate at different rhythms. But by the end of a simple fifteen-minute conversation, their physiological profiles look remarkably similar—a phenomenon called mirroring. This entrainment occurs strongly during the downward spiral of a conflict, when anger and hurt reverberate, but also goes on more subtly during pleasant interactions.5 It happens hardly at all during an emotionally neutral discussion. Researchers have seen again and again how emotions spread irresistibly in this way whenever people are near one another, even when the contact is completely nonverbal. For example, when three strangers sit facing each other in silence for a minute or two, the one who is most emotionally expressive transmits his or her mood to the other two—without speaking a single word.6 The same effect holds in the office, boardroom, or shop floor; people in groups at work inevitably “catch” feelings from one another, sharing everything from jealousy and envy to angst or euphoria. The more cohesive the group, the stronger the sharing of moods, emotional history, and even hot buttons.7

In seventy work teams across diverse industries, for instance,
members who sat in meetings together ended up sharing moods—either good or bad—within two hours. Nurses, and even accountants, who monitored their moods over weeks or every few hours as they worked together showed emotions that tracked together—and the group’s shared moods were largely independent of the hassles they shared. Studies of professional sports teams reveal similar results: Quite apart from the ups and downs of a team’s standing, its players tend to synchronize their moods over a period of days and weeks.

Contagion and Leadership

The continual interplay of limbic open loops among members of a group creates a kind of emotional soup, with everyone adding his or her own flavor to the mix. But it is the leader who adds the strongest seasoning. Why? Because of that enduring reality of business: Everyone watches the boss. People take their emotional cues from the top. Even when the boss isn’t highly visible—for example, the CEO who works behind closed doors on an upper floor—his attitude affects the moods of his direct reports, and a domino effect ripples throughout the company’s emotional climate.

Careful observations of working groups in action revealed several ways the leader plays such a pivotal role in determining the shared emotions. Leaders typically talked more than anyone else, and what they said was listened to more carefully. Leaders were also usually the first to speak out on a subject, and when others made comments, their remarks most often referred to what the leader had said than to anyone else’s comments. Because the leader’s way of seeing things has special weight, leaders “manage meaning” for a group, offering a way to interpret, and so react emotionally to, a given situation.

But the impact on emotions goes beyond what a leader says. In these studies, even when leaders were not talking, they were watched more carefully than anyone else in the group. When people raised a question for the group as a whole, they would keep
their eyes on the leader to see his or her response. Indeed, group members generally see the leader’s emotional reaction as the most valid response, and so model their own on it—particularly in an ambiguous situation, where various members react differently. In a sense, the leader sets the emotional standard.

Leaders give praise or withhold it, criticize well or destructively, offer support or turn a blind eye to people’s needs. They can frame the group’s mission in ways that give more meaning to each person’s contribution—or not. They can guide in ways that give people a sense of clarity and direction in their work and that encourage flexibility, setting people free to use their best sense of how to get the job done. All these acts help determine a leader’s primal emotional impact.

Still, not all “official” leaders in a group are necessarily the emotional leaders. When the designated leader lacks credibility for some reason, people may turn for emotional guidance to someone else who they trust and respect. This de facto leader then becomes the one who molds others’ emotional reactions. For instance, a well-known jazz group that was named for its formal leader and founder actually took its emotional cues from a different musician. The founder continued to manage bookings and logistics, but when it came time to decide what tune the group would play next or how the sound system should be adjusted, all eyes turned to the dominant member—the emotional leader.14

People Magnets

Regardless of who the emotional leader might be, however, she’s likely to have a knack for acting as a limbic “attractor,” exerting a palpable force on the emotional brains of people around her. Watch a gifted actor at work, for example, and observe how easily she draws an audience into her emotional orbit. Whether she’s conveying the agony of a betrayal or a joyous triumph, the audience feels those things too.
EMOTIONS MAY SPREAD like viruses, but not all emotions spread with the same ease. A study at the Yale University School of Management found that among working groups, cheerfulness and warmth spread most easily, while irritability is less contagious and depression spreads hardly at all. This greater diffusion rate for good moods has direct implications for business results. Moods, the Yale study found, influence how effectively people work; upbeat moods boost cooperation, fairness, and business performance.

Laughter, in particular, demonstrates the power of the open loop in operation—and therefore the contagious nature of all emotion. Hearing laughter, we automatically smile or laugh too, creating a spontaneous chain reaction that sweeps through a group. Glee spreads so readily because our brain includes open-loop circuits, designed specifically for detecting smiles and laughter that make us laugh in response. The result is a positive emotional hijack.

Similarly, of all emotional signals, smiles are the most contagious; they have an almost irresistible power to make others smile in return. Smiles may be so potent because of the beneficial role they played in evolution: Smiles and laughter, scientists speculate, evolved as a nonverbal way to cement alliances, signifying that an individual is relaxed and friendly rather than guarded or hostile.

Laughter offers a uniquely trustworthy sign of this friendliness. Unlike other emotional signals—especially a smile, which can be feigned—laughter involves highly complex neural systems that are largely involuntary: It’s harder to fake. So whereas a false smile might easily slip through our emotional radar, a forced laugh has a hollow ring.

In a neurological sense, laughing represents the shortest distance between two people because it instantly interlocks limbic systems. This immediate, involuntary reaction, as one researcher puts it, involves “the most direct communication possible between
How easily we catch leaders’ emotional states, then, has to do with how expressively their faces, voices, and gestures convey their feelings. The greater a leader’s skill at transmitting emotions, the more forcefully the emotions will spread. Such transmission does not depend on theatrics, of course; since people pay close attention to a leader, even subtle expressions of emotion can have great impact. Even so, the more open leaders are—how well they express their own enthusiasm, for example—the more readily others will feel that same contagious passion.

Leaders with that kind of talent are emotional magnets; people naturally gravitate to them. If you think about the leaders with whom people most want to work in an organization, they probably have this ability to exude upbeat feelings. It’s one reason emotionally intelligent leaders attract talented people—for the pleasure of working in their presence. Conversely, leaders who emit the negative register—who are irritable, touchy, domineering, cold—
repel people. No one wants to work for a grouch. Research has proven it: Optimistic, enthusiastic leaders more easily retain their people, compared with those bosses who tend toward negative moods.20

Let’s now take the impact of primal leadership one step further, to examine just how much emotions determine job effectiveness.

How Moods Impact Results

Emotions are highly intense, fleeting, and sometimes disruptive to work; moods tend to be less intense, longer-lasting feelings that typically don’t interfere with the job at hand. And an emotional episode usually leaves a corresponding lingering mood: a low-key, continual flow of feeling throughout the group.

Although emotions and moods may seem trivial from a business point of view, they have real consequences for getting work done. A leader’s mild anxiety can act as a signal that something needs more attention and careful thought. In fact, a sober mood can help immensely when considering a risky situation—and too much optimism can lead to ignoring dangers.21 A sudden flood of anger can rivet a leader’s attention on an urgent problem—such as the revelation that a senior executive has engaged in sexual harassment—redirecting the leader’s energies from the normal round of concerns toward finding a solution, such as improving the organization’s efforts to eliminate harassment.22

While mild anxiety (such as over a looming deadline) can focus attention and energy, prolonged distress can sabotage a leader’s relationships and also hamper work performance by diminishing the brain’s ability to process information and respond effectively. A good laugh or an upbeat mood, on the other hand, more often enhances the neural abilities crucial for doing good work.

Both good and bad moods tend to perpetuate themselves, in part because they skew perceptions and memories: When people feel upbeat, they see the positive light in a situation and recall the good things about it, and when they feel bad, they focus on the
downside. Beyond this perceptual skew, the stew of stress hormones secreted when a person is upset takes hours to become reabsorbed in the body and fade away. That’s why a sour relationship with a boss can leave a person a captive of that distress, with a mind preoccupied and a body unable to calm itself: *He got me so upset during that meeting I couldn’t go to sleep for hours last night.* As a result, we naturally prefer being with people who are emotionally positive, in part because they make us feel good.

**Emotional Hijacking**

Negative emotions—especially chronic anger, anxiety, or a sense of futility—powerfully disrupt work, hijacking attention from the task at hand. For instance, in a Yale study of moods and their contagion, the performance of groups making executive decisions about how best to allocate yearly bonuses was measurably boosted by positive feelings and was impaired by negative ones. Significantly, the group members themselves did not realize the influence of their own moods.

For instance, of all the interactions at an international hotel chain that pitched employees into bad moods, the most frequent was talking to someone in management. Interactions with bosses led to bad feelings—frustration, disappointment, anger, sadness, disgust, or hurt—about nine out of ten times. These interactions were the cause of distress more often than customers, work pressure, company policies, or personal problems. Not that leaders need to be overly “nice”; the emotional art of leadership includes pressing the reality of work demands without unduly upsetting people. One of the oldest laws in psychology holds that beyond a moderate level, increases in anxiety and worry erode mental abilities.

Distress not only erodes mental abilities, but also makes people less emotionally intelligent. People who are upset have trouble reading emotions accurately in other people—decreasing the most basic skill needed for empathy and, as a result, impairing their social skills.
Another consideration is that the emotions people feel while they work, according to new findings on job satisfaction, reflect most directly the true quality of work life. The percentage of time people feel positive emotions at work turns out to be one of the strongest predictors of satisfaction, and therefore, for instance, of how likely employees are to quit. In this sense, leaders who spread bad moods are simply bad for business—and those who pass along good moods help drive a business’s success.

Good Moods, Good Work

When people feel good, they work at their best. Feeling good lubricates mental efficiency, making people better at understanding information and using decision rules in complex judgments, as well as more flexible in their thinking. Upbeat moods, research verifies, make people view others—or events—in a more positive light. That in turn helps people feel more optimistic about their ability to achieve a goal, enhances creativity and decision-making skills, and predisposes people to be helpful. Insurance agents with a glass-is-half-full outlook, for instance, are far more able than their more pessimistic peers to persist despite rejections, and so they make more sales. Moreover, research on humor at work reveals that a well-timed joke or playful laughter can stimulate creativity, open lines of communication, enhance a sense of connection and trust, and, of course, make work more fun. Playful joking increases the likelihood of financial concessions during a negotiation. Small wonder that playfulness holds a prominent place in the tool kit of emotionally intelligent leaders.

Good moods prove especially important when it comes to teams: The ability of a leader to pitch a group into an enthusiastic, cooperative mood can determine its success. On the other hand, whenever emotional conflicts in a group bleed attention and energy from their shared tasks, a group’s performance will suffer.

Consider the results of a study of sixty-two CEOs and their top management teams. The CEOs represented some of the Fortune
500, as well as leading U.S. service companies (such as consulting and accounting firms), not-for-profit organizations, and government agencies. The CEOs and their management team members were assessed on how upbeat—energetic, enthusiastic, determined—they were. They were also asked how much conflict and tumult the top team experienced, that is, personality clashes, anger and friction in meetings, and emotional conflicts (in contrast to disagreement about ideas).

The study found that the more positive the overall moods of people in the top management team, the more cooperatively they worked together—and the better the company’s business results. Put differently, the longer a company was run by a management team that did not get along, the poorer that company’s market return.

The “group IQ,” then—the sum total of every person’s best talents contributed at full force—depends on the group’s emotional intelligence, as shown in its harmony. A leader skilled in collaboration can keep cooperation high and thus ensure that the group’s decisions will be worth the effort of meeting. Such leaders know how to balance the group’s focus on the task at hand with its attention to the quality of members’ relationships. They naturally create a friendly but effective climate that lifts everyone’s spirits.

Quantifying the “Feel” of a Company

Common wisdom, of course, holds that employees who feel upbeat will likely go the extra mile to please customers and therefore improve the bottom line. But there’s actually a logarithm that predicts that relationship: For every 1 percent improvement in the service climate, there’s a 2 percent increase in revenue.35

Benjamin Schneider, a professor at the University of Maryland, found in operations as diverse as bank branches, insurance company regional offices, credit card call centers, and hospitals that employees’ ratings of service climate predicted customer satisfaction, which drove business results. Likewise, poor morale among
OF ALL THE ASPECTS of business, superior customer care—that holy grail of any service industry—is perhaps affected most by mood contagion, and therefore by the open-loop aspect of the brain. Customer service jobs are notoriously stressful, with high emotions flowing freely, not just from customers to the front lines but also from workers to customers. From a business viewpoint, of course, bad moods in people who serve customers are bad news. First, rudeness is contagious, creating dissatisfied, even angry, customers—quite apart from whether or not a particular service matter was handled well. Second, grumpy workers serve customers poorly, with sometimes devastating results: Cardiac care units where the nurses’ general mood was “depressed” had a death rate among patients four times higher than on comparable units.36

By contrast, upbeat moods at the front lines benefit a business. If customers find interactions with a counterperson enjoyable, they start to think of the store as a “nice place” to shop. That means not only more repeat visits, but also good word-of-mouth advertising. Moreover, when service people feel upbeat, they do more to please customers: In a study of thirty-two stores in a U.S. retail chain, outlets with positive salespeople showed the best sales results.37

But just what does that finding have to do with leadership? In all of those retail outlets, it was the store manager who created the emotional climate that drove salespeople’s moods—and ultimately, sales—in the right direction. When the managers themselves were peppy, confident, and optimistic, their moods rubbed off on the staff.38
frontline customer service reps at a given point in time predicts high turnover—and declining customer satisfaction—up to three years later. This low customer satisfaction, in turn, drives declining revenues.39

So what’s the antidote? Besides the obvious relationships between climate and working conditions or salary, resonant leaders play a key role. In general, the more emotionally demanding the work, the more empathic and supportive the leader needs to be. Leaders drive the service climate and thus the predisposition of employees to satisfy customers. At an insurance company, for instance, Schneider found that effective leadership influenced service climate among agents to account for a 3 to 4 percent difference in insurance renewals—a seemingly small margin that made a big difference to the business.

Organizational consultants have long assumed a positive link of some kind between a business unit’s human climate and its performance. But data connecting the two have been sparse—and so, in practice, leaders could more easily ignore their personal style and its effects on the people they led, focusing instead on “harder” business objectives. But now we have results from a range of industries that link leadership to climate and to business performance, making it possible to quantify the hard difference for business performance made by something as soft as the “feel” of a company.

For instance, at a global food and beverage company, positive climate readings predicted higher yearly earnings at major divisions. And in a study of nineteen insurance companies, the climate created by the CEOs among their direct reports predicted the business performance of the entire organization: In 75 percent of cases, climate alone accurately sorted companies into high versus low profits and growth.40

Climate in itself does not determine performance. The factors deciding which companies prove most fit in any given quarter are notoriously complex. But our analyses suggest that, overall, the climate—how people feel about working at a company—can
account for 20 to 30 percent of business performance. Getting
the best out of people pays off in hard results.

If climate drives business results, what drives climate? Roughly
50 to 70 percent of how employees perceive their organization’s
climate can be traced to the actions of one person: the leader. More
than anyone else, the boss creates the conditions that directly
determine people’s ability to work well.\textsuperscript{41}

In short, leaders’ emotional states and actions do affect how
the people they lead will feel and therefore perform. How well
leaders manage their moods and affect everyone else’s moods,
then, becomes not just a private matter, but a factor in how well a
business will do.\textsuperscript{42}

And that gets us to how the brain drives primal leadership,
for better or for worse.