



# Don't Ignore Your Check Engine Light

How to use emotions as information.

BY **FRANCIE KILBORNE**

For centuries, lawyers and judges have posited that logic is supreme and emotion has no place in the legal world. Aristotle said: “The law is reason, free from passion.” The image of blind justice—shutting out all input except the relative weight of each side’s logical argument—epitomizes our profession’s discomfort with and disdain for emotions. Whether you believe that emotion has a role in legal decision-making, there is no denying that human beings are emotional beings, and, jokes notwithstanding, all lawyers are human. That means that lawyers are emotional beings. The horror!

How do we deal with these pesky emotions that we seem to be saddled

with? We can do what my son did when the check engine light went on in his car: Ignore them and hope they go away. Indeed, that’s what many of us are taught. Pretend that emotions don’t exist or at the very least, that they don’t matter. Even purportedly “progressive” or “enlightened” people seem to think that you can meditate away your anger or sadness. Mindfulness practices are powerful tools, but swallowing your feelings and putting on a happy face isn’t a good long-term solution for dealing with difficult emotions. It’s like putting tape over that check engine light and hoping your car will fix itself.

If you ignore or suppress your emotions, what happens? Consider this scenario:

Someone at your office—we’ll call him “Bill”—repeatedly tries to take credit for your ideas and work product. You want to be seen as a “team player” though, so you don’t say anything. Bill keeps doing it. Then, one day, after Bill has just taken credit for something you put many hours into, your 4-year-old knocks over her milk and spills it all over the floor. What happens? You explode and yell at your daughter. And then you feel terrible for exploding, thus reinforcing the idea that anger is bad and should be repressed at all costs. But ignoring your emotions never makes them go away. They resurface, sometimes misdirected at the wrong people, sometimes as depression, and sometimes as physical illness.

And the alternative? What would happen if you vent your anger, yelling at Bill when he takes credit for your work? If others are present, you end up looking like an out-of-control toddler. Other time-honored tactics for dealing with anger at the office are sarcasm and backbiting. These approaches might make you feel better in the short term, but over time will do nothing to solve the

underlying problem and will erode others' trust in you.

So what's the answer? If it's bad to suppress emotions and equally bad to vent them, how are we supposed to handle them? Are they just a curse that we have to suffer with for our entire lives? Or is it possible that they serve some purpose?

Consider this: Perhaps emotions are intended to work like that check engine light—they are meant to alert us when we need to take action to keep ourselves in good working order. According to Linda Kohanov, author of the bestselling leadership book, *The Power of the Herd*, that is exactly the purpose that emotions serve. Further, she outlines a simple, *analytical* process for interpreting what our emotions try to tell us. Allowing our considerable brainpower to work together with our emotions may contradict centuries of conditioning, but if it can provide us with a way to make productive use of emotions, it may be worth a try.

The process, known as the Four-Point Method for Emotional Agility (herein the “process”), was developed by Kohanov, inspired and informed in part by the work of Karla McLaren, an award-winning writer and researcher on emotional intelligence, and is based on extensive observation of another species of highly social mammals (horses) as well as extensive follow-up research in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, and history. Kohanov and McLaren are among those researchers who have observed that there are “predictable, rational messages behind emotions like fear, anger, frustration, sadness, grief, disappointment, and even depression.”<sup>1</sup> Horses use these messages to inform their decision-making. In other words, horses *use emotions as information*, which allows them to engage in course correction in response. After having received and acted upon the message contained in an emotion, a horse goes back to grazing. The emotion has served its purpose and naturally dissipates.

To recap, the process works like this:

Step 1: Feel the emotion in its purest form.

Step 2: Get the message behind the emotion.

Step 3: Make a change in response to the message.

Step 4: Go back to your grazing (or if you're a human, get back on task).

Most social mammals repeat this process effortlessly several times a day and in so doing, live without the gnawing angst, worry, and relationship dysfunction that we humans seem to battle daily. Most humans, however, have to re-learn this skill due to lifelong societal pressure to deny the importance of emotion.

Let's apply the process to the hypothetical above. First, you feel the emotion in its purest form. Physical sensations are the first indication of an emotion. For most people, anger brings a feeling of heat, a flushed face, increased heart rate and respiration, and a surge of energy. You may feel an urge to punch someone in the face or yell or cry. When your brain registers that these body sensations signal anger, you can experience them without losing control. Deep breathing helps, not for the purpose of suppressing the emotion, but rather to help you remain calm enough to get the message.

Your body manifests the emotion of anger with feelings of heat and energy because anger is a signal that a boundary (physical or emotional) has been violated. You need the energy that anger provides in order to take action to restore the violated boundary. Second, ask yourself the following questions to get the message behind the anger: What must be protected? What boundary must be established or restored? You want to protect your right to receive credit for your work. Armed with this information, your brain can devise the optimal strategy to achieve your goal. A spontaneous outburst or snarky email are clearly poor strategies. A face-to-face, private conversation with Bill, by contrast, may well achieve your goal.<sup>2</sup>

After talking with Bill (step 3), you will have made the required change, and you will be able easily to move to the final step and “go back to grazing.” Of course, the process does not ensure that Bill will stop the offensive behavior. It may take a few more rounds of

increasingly strong boundary setting<sup>3</sup> to do that, but it will enable you to manage your anger in a productive way.

A key part of this process is using your brain to offset the intensity of your emotion, take the edge off so to speak. When you are overcome by an emotion, your brain floods your body with hormones that adversely affect your cognitive ability.<sup>4</sup> Shifting your focus to the questions that should be asked of the emotion that you are experiencing likely short-circuits that hormone surge. Unlike suppressing emotion, shifting your focus to questioning mode after you have registered the emotion in your body allows you to get the message behind the emotion. Engaging your cognitive ability also keeps the emotion from overwhelming you and causing potentially regrettable behavior.

The process works the same way with all emotions. It's only the questions that you ask to get the message that change. Understanding and engaging this process has transformed my relationship with emotions and consequently my relationships with people. Rather than curse my feelings (as I was raised to do), I now see that they are a gift. They alert me when I need to take action—just like that check engine light. **TBJ**

## Notes

1. Linda Kohanov, *The Power of the Herd*, 234.
2. This can, of course, be difficult, stirring up new emotions such as fear, vulnerability, or anxiety. Don't despair, however, as these present new opportunities to practice the process.
3. Kohanov's most recent book, *The Five Roles of a Master Herder*, explains how to engage the dominant role productively to achieve results with people like Bill.
4. Harris R. Lieberman, Emily K. Farina, Johns Caldwell, Kelly W. Williams, Lauren A. Thompson, Philip J. Niro, Kyle A. Grohmann, James P. McClung, *Cognitive function, stress hormones, heart rate and nutritional status during simulated captivity in military survival training*, 165 *Physiology & Behavior* 86 (2016), [www.elsevier.com/locate/phb](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/phb).



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