



## Coaching at Work road-tests eMotive Cards in executive coaching

# GET EMOTIONAL

### 1 The tool What is it?

The eMotive tool is a set of cards that aims to enable coach and client to explore client emotion together, by allowing the client to access and objectify their emotion to make it easy (or easier) to discuss. The eMotive cards were developed through action research involving coaches and clients, to determine emotion measures that would be equally informative to both.

Emotion is difficult to define and highly personal. We generally access our own meaning of an emotion and tend to assume that this is what the other person is experiencing. The eMotive tool addresses this by providing a framework where the client can reflect on their emotional feelings in a non-prescriptive way.

● For more information go to:  
[www.westwoodcoaching.co.uk](http://www.westwoodcoaching.co.uk)

### How does it work?

The tool consists of 20 cards showing words commonly used to describe emotions. One side of the card has a single word in large type, the reverse has four words that are similar or related to the word on the front side.

The cards can be laid out with the single word facing upwards, or be given to clients with the invitation to sort through them. The client is encouraged to select any and as many words that are relevant to their emotional feelings about an event or

situation. If a word is near to, but does not quite describe an emotion, the alternatives on the reverse can be considered.

The client may not find any of the words relevant. Spaces are provided on each card, as well as blank cards for clients to write down their own words instead. The creator of the cards found it very important that clients have an opportunity to use their own words.

### 2 The coach/ administrator The experience

As an executive coach, I regularly encounter the idea that emotions have no place in the workplace. I will always explore the boundaries of coaching when taking a brief from my organisational clients, especially the reasons why any topics or domains might be considered off-limits. This can open up a valuable conversation about the emotional culture of an organisation. A good example of my experiences of the eMotive cards can be seen in my work at Reading College, UK.

Reading College is part of the Activate Learning group, which recognises that the biggest barrier to learning is the interference of self-generated feelings and emotions of inadequacy. Its Learning Philosophy explicitly uses the relationship between emotion, processes in the brain and motivation in learning. Emotive language is accepted by staff, used to express language and behaviour from students who are

learning to cope with the demands of their studies. Learning to express and use emotions in a healthy way is an explicit part of the curriculum, which, rather than taking a purely cognitive approach to learning, addresses all three domains to shape its approach to learning and teaching. This philosophy extends to staff too, who are actively encouraged to follow up on formal and informal opportunities to learn.

Following a recent restructure, there have been significant changes at management level that have created developmental challenges for new role holders. To support the renewed

### eMotive Cards: pros and cons

#### UPSIDE

- Enables the coach and client to establish a dialogue 'in the client's own language'
- Effective way of externalising and objectifying emotion, facilitating discussion
- Easy way of opening up a dialogue
- Client engagement
- Clients respond positively to the absence of 'rules' for use of the tool
- Research based

#### DOWNSIDE

- Coach has to be vigilant not to impose their language on the client
- Validity and reliability cannot be confirmed with variable scales



management team, Reading College designed a comprehensive leadership development programme to run throughout the current academic year with one-to-one coaching at its core.

The programme's objectives and participants' expected outcomes include becoming a strategically minded leader; improved collaboration; developing together as a management team; sharing and learning from each other; developing specific leadership skills and discovering new tools.

Even people who consider themselves emotionally aware can find it difficult to access their own emotions. Furthermore, the coach may make assumptions that have to be clarified, risking the flow of the conversation. Thus, it is immensely valuable to have a tool that shifts the focus to the richness of the emotive experience itself by helping the story unfold fully for the client while clarifying where I am limiting my understanding of the client's experience.

When using the cards, my preferred approach is to give as few instructions as possible and hand them over as a stack with the single word facing up. I find that the quicker clients handle the cards the less apprehensive they are. We may not always use both sides of the cards, though if the conversation appears to stall, the reverse can deepen

it further or confirm that the emotion has been fully explored. Clients will often write down the emotions themselves or take a picture of the cards after laying them out. Using the cards and subsequent conversation can take between 5 and 45 minutes, and usually comes to a natural end. Feedback has been unanimously positive.

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### 3 The client The experience

In one of my first sessions I described an incident that had left me feeling very frustrated. I had brought it up while we were discussing my coaching needs as an example of an emotional response I was increasingly fed up with.

When the cards were suggested, I had some apprehension as I was unsure how 'deep' this conversation was going to go. However, once I started to look through them, a number of emotions jumped out at me as I recalled the incident.

Seeing them laid out on the table was cathartic; it enabled me to revisit the event and grapple with the emotions I had felt at the time. This, in turn, helped me spell out how I had felt and brought

into focus that I had already left behind those feelings without realising it.

Next, I chose some emotions that expressed how I would have preferred to have felt instead, and noticed that I had put them away from the less productive ones on the table. That left space to put other cards in between the two, describing a more helpful emotive response to similar situations that would help me notice my progress in the meantime.

Seeing the scenarios laid out in the cards gave me a sense of understanding about the incident. In addition, I made explicit to myself what I am aiming for instead, and identified steps in between to help me get there. The exercise highlighted that I have far more control over my response than I had realised.

### The verdict

The eMotive cards have multiple applications, such as helping to create insight into the client's 'emotional landscape' in day-to-day interactions. The value of the cards for me as a coach is that they can help build rapport with my client through actively exploring how they experience the world. The positive effect of having used them on the working alliance is very noticeable.

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