



EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT LEADERSHIP ON A FILM SET

by **Bill Britten**

Anyone who's spent time in production will recognise the huge difference in productivity between a focused, harmonious shoot and a fractious, faltering one. And while directors may be great artists, insightful chroniclers or inspiring craftsmen and women, when it comes to the daily reality of shooting a film or TV programme, they are, above all, leaders of a group of people engaged in a collective endeavour.

Sadly much of the last twenty years' development in thinking about leadership has not percolated through to the film and television industries. Particularly influential in other industries has been the American writer Daniel Goleman, who maintains that cleverness and IQ are merely entry requirements for most high-level leadership and that what distinguishes the really successful is their Emotional Intelligence – the ability to understand and work with the emotions both of the self and others.

While there are lots of qualities we look for in a leader – courage, vision, charisma, calm, decisiveness, determination and so on - above all, argues Goleman, we look to leaders for emotional guidance. And in terms of filming, this broadly translates into inspiring and motivating the many creative and talented people on a set to deliver their very best work in the service of a compelling and clearly communicated vision.

It's my belief that to do this directors, producers and HoDs need two fundamental abilities:

1. The insight to understand what is really going on
2. The interpersonal skills to deliver the leadership that's required

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Firstly there's the little matter of insight. There are so many things demanding the attention of any leader on set that it is all too easy to get caught up in the surface noise. *What's the next shot? What resources are needed? What are the time constraints? Who's being difficult?* Added to which directors in particular are constantly being asked to make decisions. As Bob Hoskins famously described it the job can feel like being pecked to death by a thousand pigeons.

In all the hurly burly it takes a special kind of personal discipline to be able to step back and comprehend the emotional undercurrents. Central to this is the ability to listen. Listening should be easy enough, right? You just hear the words the other person is saying. In fact it can be incredibly difficult, especially for someone under pressure. Yet it's only by *really* listening - listening to what's not being said as well as what is - that a director (or any other on-set leader) can truly understand the bigger picture of how people are feeling: their worries, frustrations, ambitions, resentments and what's preventing them committing their energy and talent to making the project as good as it can be.

This kind of listening is partly a question of attention. Having the mental discipline to give someone your full attention when so much else is calling for it. But it's also a matter of being open to what they are saying. Alan Alda defines real listening as *"the willingness to let the other person change you"* and there is a profound truth in this. It's not a question of unconditionally embracing someone else's argument. But unless you are making a genuine enquiry into their point of view and are truly open to the possibility of being influenced by it, then you are simply pausing while they speak. And if that's all you are doing they will surely know it. I'm embarrassed to recall a moment in a particularly fraught shoot when a camera operator made a suggestion to me. Deciding instantly that I didn't like it, yet knowing it was important to offer encouragement, I paused for a few seconds and stood there thinking *"I wonder*

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whether this is long enough to look as though I'm considering it" before thanking him for the idea and concluding that it wouldn't work in this instance. He saw through me, of course, and didn't make another suggestion for a fortnight.

Regularly and sincerely listening will help you spot problems before they arise. And when they rear up unexpectedly - as they surely will - only by looking past your own frustration can you begin to understand the real issues and be the kind of leader your team needs to get things back on track.

It's in regard to this second leadership skill - the ability to deliver the leadership that's needed - that Goleman's thinking really comes into its own. In his influential essay *Leadership that gets results* he outlines six styles that leaders need to have at their command.

Three of them have particular relevance to leading on set. *Authoritative* leadership offers a compelling vision and invites people to join in realising it. *Affiliative* leadership prioritises team members' emotions and creates a supportive, positive atmosphere in which people feel valued and supported. A *pacesetting* style sees the leader modelling the spirit, behaviour and approach needed to get the job done. You'll recognise this from the notion of being in first, out last and not asking someone else to do something you're not willing to do yourself. Each of these styles has its place in your repertoire and needs to be deployed adeptly.

The other three styles Goleman describes are perhaps less regularly applicable but they too play their part. A *coaching* leadership style empowers team members to make some decisions themselves and focuses on people's development as much as the end goal. *Democratic* leadership allows majority opinion decision-making. As silly as this may sound, it has its place. I remember directing an episode of *Holby City* when England were playing a World Cup match and only a fool would have



resisted the majority desire to stop filming to watch the match.

For control freaks like me (and let's face it, most producers, directors and HoDs are just that) the idea of letting go of some decisions can feel very scary indeed. But used appropriately it cements people's commitment, reduces the pressure on the leader and releases him or her to concentrate on the big questions.

Lastly *Coercive* leadership – forcing compliance through status or personality – can come into its own during a crisis or when time is very tight. But overuse it at your peril.

The point of Goleman's thinking, of course, is not to settle on a single all-weather style, but to use your emotional intelligence to adapt to the individual and the moment. Growing your flexibility and behavioural skill, and using insight to make better leadership choices, should be the ambition of every director, producer and anyone working in a leadership role within a crew.

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