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Emotional agility key to being your best



Tahn Sharpe August 22, 2018

in









Susan David grew up in the white suburbs of South Africa. She called it a “community committed to not seeing”. But her first real experience of denial at a personal level came when her father died at a young age.

Speaking at the Portfolio Construction Forum in Sydney today, David said she went back to school after his death and became “a master of being OK”.

She said she floundered through her teenage years, caught up in denial, until a teacher finally told her to “tell the truth, and write like no one’s reading”.

“It was a revolution and a revelation that shaped my life and career,” she said.

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because they fear failure have “dead people’s goals”, David said.

“Only dead people never fail. Only dead people never experience the disappointment that comes with that failure. Only dead people never get their hearts broken. Discomfort is the price of admission in a fragile, beautiful world, and you don’t get to build a career, or have a family, or leave the world a better place, without stress and discomfort,” David explained.

A tricky paradox

Emotional agility is not an easy thing to attain, she says, largely due to the complexity of the modern world. While there is a laundry list of definitions for ‘agility’, including being inclusive, customer-focused and relational, there is a paradox that makes it tricky to navigate.

“That paradox is that technology has evolved at a speed that is significantly greater than the speed at which we have evolved,” she said. “The same complexity that drives the need for agility also undermines it, because when people are feeling stressed, or facing ambiguity, they are less able to be innovative and much more likely to focus on what is known. They are much less able to be collaborative and more likely to become tribal.”

Nevertheless, David said, there are four critical aspects of emotional agility that we can focus on and aspire to master.

The first is to ‘show up’ to our emotions. By identifying them and naming them, she said, we make them much easier to face.

“A colleague of mine found that when people are able to show up to their emotion and name their emotion, they’re significantly more able to stay the course with their financial plan,” she said.

The second aspect is that we need to take a meta-view of our emotions, which means noticing your emotions but not necessarily acting on them. Emotions are data, not directives, she said. Stop focusing on being right and ask yourself if the emotion you’re experiencing is serving you.

“Even if your boss is being an idiot, you still have the choice of who you want to be in that context,” she suggested.

The third thing to remember is to ‘walk your why’, David said, and not pick up on the behaviours of others.

“Social comparison is one of the most toxic experiences we can have as human beings,” she believes. “Connect with whether you truly want something. Know who you are and what you stand for – whether it’s collaboration, fairness, learning or whatever...knowing those values is crucial.”

The final component of emotional agility David identified was the ability to move on. We should stop thinking of ‘have to’ goals and start considering them ‘want to’ goals, she explained.

“Imagine if you’re trying to lose weight and you have a ‘have to’ goal of never eating chocolate,” she said. “Psychologically, that leads to rebellion, and all you want is chocolate.”

Instead, make weight loss a ‘want to’ goal, she advised, basing this idea on our sense of inner why.

“It completely shifts the physics of willpower,” she said.

David acknowledged the crowd of investment professionals and financial advisers, and gave a nod to the increasing focus the financial services industry is placing on so-called ‘soft skills’.

“Now you’ve got to add mindfulness to the long list of things you’ve got to do,” she joked.

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