



ZENGER | FOLKMAN

Emotional Agility: Master Challenges Without Getting Derailed

Dr. Susan David

Co-founder, Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching



Dr. Susan David

Dr. Susan David (PhD), psychologist on faculty at the Harvard Medical School, co-founder and co-director of the Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching, and CEO of Evidence Based Psychology, joins Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joe Folkman in this edition of the Zenger Folkman podcast series.

Dr. David has worked with senior leadership of hundreds of organizations, including the United Nations, Ernst & Young, and The World Economic Forum. Her work has been featured in numerous publications, including the *Harvard Business Review*, *Time*, *Fast Company*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. An in-demand speaker and advisor, she is the author of *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*.

[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN TO THE PODCAST](#)



You’ve written about “emotional agility.” What is that and why is it so essential?

In organizations, and in everyday life, we have thousands of thoughts, emotions, experiences, and inner-stories. How we deal with these things drives everything we do: our relationships, our jobs and projects, how we lead, and how we interact with the world around us.

Emotional agility is fundamentally the ability to be with and be healthy with our thoughts, emotions, and stories—even ones that might be troubling or concerning—and still take action that is in accordance with how we want to live and lead in the world.

What led you to become fascinated by the subject of emotional agility?

I grew up in apartheid South Africa. Although I was a white South African, and therefore not subject to the same traumas that a lot of my friends were subject to, I grew up in a culture of extreme chaos and violence.



When I was 16 years old, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. At that time, I became very interested in how we can deal with life's experiences, complexities, and disappointments in ways that are healthy and that allow us to keep our values and goals intact. That was the impetus for my interest in this subject.

Over the work that I've done in organizations as a clinical psychologist, I've seen the reality that so many leaders face: feeling pushed and pulled every single day in terms of how to act and how to deal with the complexities and challenges they experience. What it takes for us to thrive and be effective in the world is often at odds with the prevailing messaging that you should just be happy, think positively, or just forge forward. *Emotional Agility* explores some of the oftentimes counterintuitive ways of dealing with our thoughts and emotions.

How does your research about emotional agility mesh with the concepts of learned optimism and the positive-psychology movement?

A lot of the cultural messaging around happiness is the idea that we should focus on happiness. It should be an end-goal and something we should all strive for. However, research shows that people who have an expectation around happiness tend to, over time, become less happy. One of the reasons for this is that when we have a goal around happiness, we often start to engage in an internal struggle with ourselves.

In psychology we talk about Type 1 and Type 2 thinking. When thinking about worries, Type 1 thinking is actually healthy. This is our minds doing what our minds were meant to do, which is to judge, evaluate, and be concerned about our safety in the world. These are healthy and normal worries that have become apologized for by society.

What often happens is that we start to have Type 2 worries: "I shouldn't be worried." "I'm sad that I'm unhappy." I've seen leaders push aside concerns that are relevant and warranted. When people push aside difficult or challenging thoughts or emotions, the very thing they try not to think about is what they think about. Anyone who's been on a diet knows that



when they try not to think about chocolate cake, that's what they dream about.

To circle back to your question, one of the core ways we can be emotionally agile is to not engage with ourselves about whether we should or should not have a particular thought or emotion and give up any struggle we have inside of ourselves by dropping the rope. Acceptance is the prerequisite to change. It is at that point that we are able to move forward effectively, and often, as a byproduct, we actually become happier. We don't become happier by trying to be happy—we become happier by focusing on what is intrinsically important to us.

There's been a lot written about this quality called "mindfulness." Do you see emotional agility as being similar or do you see a distinction between emotional agility and mindfulness?

In *Emotional Agility*, I speak to four key concepts of emotional agility: Showing Up, Stepping Out, Walking Your Why, and Moving On. Mindfulness has a place in the second aspect of emotional agility: Stepping Out. Mindfulness is the ability to notice your thoughts and feelings as thoughts and feelings. This is a critical way that we can get some distance between us and our thoughts and our feelings. Emotional agility is much more than mindfulness. Emotional agility is the ability to make habit changes that are fundamentally consistent with our values and goals.

I love a quote you use by Viktor Frankl about stimulus and response.

A core aspect of emotional agility, really the basis, is beautifully captured in a quote that came out of Frankl's experiences in Nazi death camps:

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."



When people are emotionally inagile, they are driven by thoughts or emotions. Someone in a meeting might think, “I’m feeling undermined and I’m going to just shut down.” In Frankl’s terms, this individual doesn’t have a space between stimulus and response.

Part of the process of emotional agility is being able to show up to those feelings, thoughts, and emotions, but to also create a distance that is healthy and to then make choices that are productive and effective. For example, “I’m in this meeting and I’m feeling undermined, but I can still choose to contribute.” Instead of being driven by feelings, thoughts, and emotions, we are able to bring the best of ourselves forward.

I assume you believe that qualities like emotional agility can be acquired and strengthened. How do you do that?

I believe, and research suggests, that we can develop these qualities and that these qualities are greatly needed in organizations.

One of the great paradoxes is that every organization feels the need for itself and its employees to be agile, collaborative, and adaptive. It is interesting that the same complexity that drives the need to be agile, collaborative, and adaptive causes them to do the opposite when dealing with the stress of complexity. Instead of being collaborative, they are more likely to shut down and become singularly focused on what they are trying to achieve.

Showing up to emotion is the idea of not struggling with emotions. Instead of saying, “I’m stressed,” recognize that there is a difference between being stressed versus being angry, disappointed, or sad. When we label our emotions, especially our difficult emotions, in a more nuanced way, we are able to make choices that are intentional and more connected with what we are really feeling.

In the Stepping Out chapter, I talk about the idea of determining who is in charge. Is the thinker in charge or is the thought in charge? Leaders often let the thought be in charge. “I’m angry, so I’m not going to respond.”



Is emotional agility something that can be acquired early in childhood?

We have inherent capabilities, but at the same time, from a young age we acquire and develop skillsets. Even with the best of intentions, parents might say something like, “I know that no one would play with you at school today. Don’t worry, I’ll play with you.” The parent tries to fix the child’s experience but this takes away from the child’s critical ability to learn about emotions—that they are transient and are not here to stay.

As another example, when you are angry with a customer service agent, a little voice might say, “If I get angry and rude with this person, it’s not going to help.” You can feel the emotion, but you can also rise above it. This is a gift we give our children when we allow them to experience an emotion, realize the emotion’s starters, and help them label that emotion. We can enable our children, even at a very young age, to start discerning what they can do to help themselves in certain situations. Instead of coming in with solutions, let them generate the solutions themselves.

Is there any correlation between a person’s level in an organization and emotional agility? Are senior executives more emotionally agile than lower-level leaders?

There hasn’t been any research looking at whether emotional agility is predictive, or an outcome, of particular levels in organizations. I have worked with many executives who struggle with the idea that emotions can be useful. Being closed to emotions often undercuts effectiveness.

As an example, when an organization is going through a huge amount of change and executives are very black-and-white, or lack nuance, about emotions, they might say, “You’re either with the change or you’re against it.” But human beings are human beings, and they often feel a full-range of emotions all at once—sometimes sadness, anger, excitement, and fear all in the same context. When executives don’t have the capability to be open to the full-range of emotions that the team or organization might be



feeling, they undercut and undermine the change process itself as well as motivation, engagement, and other important factors that help drive success and effectiveness in organizations.

What can leaders do to overcome struggles with emotional agility?

There are a few practical things that I've described in *Emotional Agility*, but there are a few questions leaders can ask themselves to assess their level of emotional agility:

"I might be right, but is my response serving me, the organization, or the team?" Sometimes leaders get hooked into the idea of being right. It is helpful to remember that if the entire world agreed that you were right, you'd still have a choice as to how you are going to act.

"Is what I'm doing workable?" Leaders often get stuck in situations in which they need to have a difficult conversation or they are sidling away from something that they really need to do. We often take action in the short-term. For example, we avoid the difficult conversation and we might get an immediate sense of relief. The idea of workability is that there are some actions that feel good in the short-term, but don't serve us long-term and do not bring us closer to being the leader, employee, or person that we want to be over the long-term.

"I know what my task is, but what is my objective?" By asking this question, we are moving ourselves away from the idea that we need to check things off of our lists. We can then elevate our thinking to determine what we are really trying to achieve. In a meeting, you might be trying to get through a particular task but your objective is to have a real conversation or to make sure that the team stays motivated.

I heard a speech that you gave in which you talked about a behavior called "bottling up."

When people are struggling in life and in work, they'll often have what I call in *Emotional Agility* "bottling" behavior. Bottling, which is often done with good intentions, is simply pushing thoughts and emotions aside.



“I’m not going to think about it; I’m just going to think about the project at hand.” People often use this kind of behavior as a default.

Studies show that these people are more likely to have lower levels of well-being and higher levels of stress and burnout. One study shows that when a team leader goes into a meeting with bottling behavior, even though team members don’t know that the leader is bottling, their blood pressures increase. There is a contagious fix that happens in our teams that is often unintentional, simply by just how open or not open we are to our emotions and thoughts.

Are there differences in emotional agility by gender?

We’ve been talking about bottling, which is pushing emotions aside. There’s another emotion called “brooding,” which is the opposite of bottling. Brooding is when individuals hold emotions inside, dwelling on and analyzing them. Even though brooding looks different from bottling, research shows that brooding is also associated with lower levels of well-being and is actually predictive of the likelihood of depression.

When you look at gender differences in bottling and brooding, research shows that men are much more likely to bottle—push things aside and get on with the task at hand. This research shows that women are more likely to exhibit brooding behavior—going on and on in our minds about what it is we are feeling and why.

Is there anything else you’d like to tell our listeners and readers about emotional agility?

One of the most fascinating parts of the book that I loved writing was talking about the difference between “have-to” and “want-to” goals. A have-to goal could be, “I have to lose weight because everyone is at me about it.” A have-to goal is often driven by a sense of obligation, shame, or extrinsic pressure. A want-to goal could be, “I want to lose weight because I want to be with my children as they grow up.” A want-to goal is deeply connected with what you value.



Even though the end point of both types of goals is the same, they drive different parts of behavior. For example, if you have a weight-loss goal that is a have-to goal and you see a piece of chocolate cake, that's all you want. A have-to goal triggers your mind to rebel and want the very thing you cannot have; it makes you resentful. When you have a want-to goal that's intrinsically valued, you open the refrigerator and it alters the physics of your willpower and the temptation. You'll see the chocolate cake, but you'll see everything else in the refrigerator as well. Research shows that when we have want-to goals, we are more likely to attain them and make real changes to the habits we want to alter.

Now apply this idea to organizations. We often trap ourselves with subtleties of language. "I have to go to this meeting." "I have to finish the project." These have-to goals have an intrinsic want-to component: "I want to go to this meeting because I want this project to be effective." It is critical from an emotional-agility perspective to not pretend that you want something that you really don't want. But you can try to surface intrinsic desires, that might have become sources of resentment, that are connected to something that is important to you. This can be freeing and can help you unlock more effective behaviors over time.

Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life, published by the Harvard Business School Press, can be found online and wherever books are sold.

You can also visit <http://susandavid.com/learn> to take a quiz and receive your free emotional-agility report.

For more information, listen to our **podcast** with Susan where she discusses her research. Subscribe to our podcasts at: zengerfolkman.com/subscribe-to-podcast/.