

THEO IJZERMANS & COEN DIRKX

# the Stumbling BLOCKS of the Mind



Dealing with emotions  
in the workplace: Rational  
Effectiveness Training

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# Foreword

We often meet with disapproval when we talk about emotions or feelings at work. It's almost as though we were expected to switch off our emotions the moment we entered the workplace. This 'ostrich' behaviour, which seems to dominate today's business landscape, prevents employees from having the opportunity to show strong emotion in response to the problems they encounter at work and, even more importantly, to learn how to deal with these emotions.

*The Stumbling Blocks of the Mind* is an excellent guidebook for employees at all levels of organisations to learn how to deal with these emotions. Undesirable tension and annoyances can be found on every level. This book clearly explains how to change convictions, attitude and beliefs that are at the root of self-undermining emotions. It uses practical examples that are easy to identify with and provides numerous exercises that can be used every day to change negative emotions.

Rational Effectiveness Training (RET) is a method that has proven its value in practice. It is based on the pioneering work of internationally recognised psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis. It is currently used around the world by top management and lower-level employees alike in order to learn how to cope with the numerous and diverse problems that are encountered in our rapidly changing economic world.

The authors are well trained in this approach and have supplemented the traditional method with a number of unique and creative aspects.

I am certain that if you read this book carefully and apply the techniques described in it, you will ultimately find more pleasure in your work, become more productive and be better able to maintain your social contacts.

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# 1 How do you create your own stress?

## A few examples

### Peter

Peter de Waard (31) has been head of the Insurance Department of Algemene Bank Holland (ABH) in Naarden for the past two years. On a Wednesday evening in March, he comes home after work, flops down on the couch and sighs deeply: 'It was a madhouse again today,' he grumbles to his wife. 'So incredibly busy. And my so-called staff useless.'

Peter is too tired to do anything else. All kinds of thoughts run through his head. 'Oh dear, I have to make sure I prepare well for that merger meeting next Friday. I still need to call Rose from administration to me. I mustn't forget Sonja's birthday. I really should have a serious talk with Yordi about his constant tardiness. Hey, I still haven't got round to that budget report...' Peter is clearly in need of a rest.

Let's have a look at what happened at Peter's office that Wednesday. It is almost nine o'clock. Peter is sitting at his desk. He just got an e-mail from the head office: because of the merger with National Bank Netherlands (NBN), the number of branches will

have to be reduced. On Friday, an emergency meeting is scheduled at the head office in Amsterdam, and all directors and department heads are expected to attend. Then the expected impact on staff will be discussed. At that moment, his secretary Sonja walks in, giving an account of her telephone conversation with a furious Mr De Groot. De Groot is one of his office's most important clients. There seems to have been a serious error in a policy change. Mr De Groot demands an immediate appointment with the head of the department. This is very inconvenient for Peter. His diary is already overflowing for the day. Over Sonja's shoulder, he sees his employee Yordi, who comes running down the corridor with a red head. It is five past nine. There has been clear talk that everyone is experiencing the start-up of the day at eight-thirty. Peter feels the anger rising within him ...

Now let's listen to what is going on in Peter's head. What is he thinking? What is he saying to himself?

On reading the email:

- 'Oh dear, now I will lose my job. That's going to cost me my head.'
- 'It's not fair; I'm working my ass off, they shouldn't do that.'

At furious client De Groot:

- 'He has no right to force an appointment on me.'
- 'He should sit here sometime, then he'll squeak differently.'
- 'Because of this new appointment, all my planning is in a mess; I never manage to do it.'

At the mistake made in administration: - 'Damn, it's that time again, they can never get it right for once.'

- 'Another mistake, what does that Rose actually do?'
- 'If she doesn't like it, just find another job.'

At his employee Yordi, who misses another start-up:

- 'He is late again. Who does he think he is?'
- 'It's always the same with those employees of mine.'

## **Paul**

Three rooms away sits Paul van den Boomgaard (32), a colleague of Peter's. He has been head of the mortgages department for two years. He too has just read the e-mail from head office. He has just rescheduled his appointments to speak to Mr De Groot, who threatened to switch to another bank because his son did not get a mortgage. Then he has already received a call from his employee Bas, who is calling in sick for the third time this year. And at a quarter past four that afternoon, his secretary Antoinette will leave for home an hour early without further explanation. This seems to be becoming a habit.

Yet we see an important difference. While Peter ignites a rage twice this day and his department looks sullen all day, Paul remains calm and works steadily and efficiently. There is a pleasant atmosphere in his department.

What is Paul thinking? What is he saying to himself?

On reading the email:

- 'I wonder what they will say.'
- 'Maybe I can put forward my ideas about the merger.'

At angry customer De Groot:

- 'There you have another one of those. Annoying, but it's part of the job; not all customers are equally reasonable.'
- 'Maybe he's right too, maybe I'd be pissed off too if I were in his shoes.'
- 'I'll ask Antoinette to reschedule my appointments for today.'

On the phone call from his co-worker Bas:

- 'Mm, that's already the third time. I'll ask him in our next bila if there might be something going on. Is he having a good time? Or is something else going on? If not, I will hold him accountable.'

About his secretary, who leaves too early:

- 'Annoying, but Antoinette is definitely struggling again. I will have another talk with her this week.'

Paul comes home from work. He hugs his wife and is all attention for Guusje, his one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. He has already forgotten about his work. He still wants to play tennis tonight.

What have we seen now? Two department heads, Peter and Paul, experience more or less the same thing at work. Yet not only do they both react very differently, they also feel differently. Is it because of the situation, the things they have experienced? No, the difference is mainly in their way of thinking, in how they look at those events. They think differently and therefore they also feel differently and show different behaviour.



## **Tension and stress**

Tension and stress are only partly related to outside influences. People largely create their own stress. Our way of thinking and imagining ultimately determines how we feel and also how we act and behave. This is the starting point of Rational Effectiveness Training (RET) or Rational-Emotivational Training, a widely used method for dealing better with all kinds of situations that can trigger stress.

With this book, you can learn to use this method to better understand your non-productive emotions, which not only cause a lot of stress, but also result in you performing less than you could actually do. It also covers a number of methods that will help you examine and change the way you think.

## 2 What you think is what you feel

### **Observation, interpretation and evaluation**

The theory behind Rational Effectiveness Training (RET) is that how you think about and perceive the world around you ultimately determines how you feel and behave. To understand RET properly, it is important to distinguish between observation, interpretation and evaluation. Using a number of examples, we will demonstrate the difference.

#### **OBSERVATION**

Let us look over Peter's shoulder as he opens the e-mail from head office. He reads that some branches will be closed down and that an emergency meeting has been scheduled. This is pure observation. These are facts. If Peter were to describe these observations for himself, he might think: 'This is an e-mail with a specific message.' In that case, his thoughts consist of nothing more than a pure observation, i.e. just an objective account of the facts. But in reality, people rarely think like this.

#### **INTERPRETATION**

Peter goes further than pure observation. He immediately extends what he reads to mean: 'I am going to lose my job.' This is an interpretation of what he sees; he has put a meaning to his observation. This meaning may be correct or incorrect. We see that Paul, who gets the same message, does not immediately think this way. He gives a different meaning to it: he sees opportunities to find out more and put his ideas forward.



Once again, these different thoughts about the same message they received may later prove to be correct or incorrect. People tend not to distinguish between observation and interpretation. In daily life, this is usually a great advantage. Life would become a lot harder if we had to consider everything with extreme accuracy. On the other hand, many misunderstandings occur because people give different interpretations to the same facts, often without realising it. 'That's just the way it is!'

## **EVALUATION**

People not only interpret their experiences in all kinds of different ways, they also assign them a value, such as 'this is dangerous', 'this is bad' or 'this is good'. These thoughts about events emotionalise our experiences.

Let's go back to the reactions to the e-mail message again. Peter constantly evaluates events negatively. In fact, he says to himself: 'There is danger for me', 'Terrible things are going to happen in the future', and: 'They are unfair'. Paul, on the other hand, is much less concerned with evaluating events. He is not currently thinking in terms of danger to himself. He is wondering what he could do about it - he has a wait-and-see, more neutral stance in his thinking. We see this difference in attitude in the other events as well. With the furious client, 'judgmental' thoughts arise in Peter's mind, such as: 'He has no right.' And thoughts of failure such as: 'My planning is going haywire, I'll never succeed.' Paul, though annoyed, responds more acceptingly: 'This is just part of my job.'

Now reread Peter and Paul's different thoughts on the events, and note the difference in the evaluations of the different events. Not surprisingly, Peter and Paul experience different emotions.

This book is about the major influence of our thinking on how we feel. Throughout, it will show how evaluations play a central role in generating feelings. By the way we evaluate, we give events emotional charges, which can cause us to feel tense, anxious, stressed or angry, for example. Of course, interpretations also matter; these can be correct or incorrect, favourable or unfavourable.

Take the example of the possibility of Peter and Paul being fired. Let's assume for a moment that both of them interpret this as follows: 'I'm getting fired.' Incidentally, this interpretation already contains a distortion of reality. Given the facts, a correct interpretation is: 'There is a chance I could be fired.' But starting from this distorted interpretation, the evaluation can still be very different. For example, Peter thinks: 'That's disastrous, then I won't have a life', 'How am I going to pay my mortgage then?' and Paul thinks: 'I'd hate that, but I'll manage.' Peter suffers from feelings of panic as a result. Paul, on the other hand, feels normal justified anxiety. The intensity of their feelings is quite different.

## **The founder of RET: Dr Albert Ellis**

The foundation for the current theory and training and therapy methods was laid in the 1950s by American psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis (born in 1913). Ellis is the founder of Rational Emotive Therapy, which was later developed into training models for the business community called Rational Effectiveness Training or Rational-Emotive Training.

A psychotherapist trained in psychoanalysis, Ellis became more and more dissatisfied with the lengthy therapy process inherent to the psychoanalytical method. He began experimenting with a

more direct approach that entailed giving his clients advice and entering into discussions with them in order to convince them of other beliefs, instead of waiting until they gradually arrived at new insights on their own. In doing so, he particularly emphasised thought patterns and interpretations of events. His theory was based on the ideas of Greek philosophers like Epictetus and the English philosopher Bertrand Russell, as well as the newer ideas of two students of Freud who had gone in their own direction, Alfred Adler and Karen Horney.

In the late 50s Ellis played an important role in the creation of unconventional ideas about sex by means of countless books and lectures on sexuality, considered controversial at the time. His colourful, humorous and revealing language earned him many friends as well as enemies, the latter primarily among conservative puritans. During the 70s, his ideas on the relationship between thought and feeling became more prominent within psychology. Scientific research proved the importance of cognition in the generation of emotions and behaviour. Behavioural therapists also began to show more interest in the role played by thought processes in problem behaviour. The ideas of people like Ellis began to pervade psychology and psychotherapy, often in altered form and more than once without acknowledgement.

In the early 70s Ellis was primarily active as a management consultant. His publications of that time included the book *Executive Leadership: A rational approach*. In the early 80s, a study among American psychotherapists showed that Albert Ellis was among the three most influential psychologists/psychiatrists, together with Carl Rogers and Sigmund Freud.