The Emotional Bank Account (EBA)  
by Leonard Kok

In my course of work, I usually ask participants in my workshops to talk about their personal expectations for the time that they are going to spend with me. Sometimes I also ask them simple questions like “What makes you happy at work?” or “What are your pet peeves at your workplace?” I list them all down on the flipchart, into two columns. Interestingly, the things that make them happy are more often than not, human beings and the collegiality that exists in their offices. Their pet peeves, though wide-ranging, are usually non-human and inanimate. Well, surprised? I think not. When we have warm, friendly, positive relationships at our workplaces, the community increases its effectiveness and the ‘enemy’ becomes paper instead of each other.

What is the Emotional Bank Account?

Stephen Covey (The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People) uses the metaphor of Emotional Bank Account to describe "the amount of trust that’s been built up in a relationship". This is one of the most powerful and graphic concepts to date on building relationships based on trust. The basic tenet of this simple yet profound principle is that we maintain a personal “emotional” bank account with anyone who works or relates with us. This account begins on a neutral balance. And just as with any bank account, we can make deposits and withdrawals. However, instead of dealing with units of monetary value, we deal with emotional units.

This concept is powerful because it transcends time, space and hierarchy; that is; it doesn’t matter whether you are the office cleaner, middle, senior management, or the boss. Thus, a kind word from anyone in the office to another person of any level is a deposit. When you do anything nice to anyone in your office without expectation of any good in return, that is a deposit. This includes making a nice cuppa for your busy colleague or offering free rides to your colleagues because it’s ‘along the way.’ Also, when you relate to your potential client as a flesh and blood human being rather than your potential bottom line, you are making a deposit.

The deposits do not stop there as it transcends time and space: After work, there are the ‘inner-circle’ people whom we relate to and love. A loving hug and a listening ear for our loved ones is definitely a deposit.

Covey describes 6 major ways of making deposits on the Emotional Bank Account:

- Understanding the individual;
- Attending to little things;
- Keeping commitments;
- Clarifying expectations;
- Showing personal integrity; and
- Apologizing sincerely when you make a "withdrawal"

On the other hand, an unkind word or deed, being disrespectful, being proud or arrogant; or actions that betray the trust of your friend or organisation, is a withdrawal from the Emotional Bank Account (EBA). Trust is needed for a relationship to thrive. Without trust, we may manage to accommodate and endure another person. However, it cannot be mutually satisfying.
in the long run. It is easy to take another person, a spouse or friend, a relative or anyone we deal with, for granted. Yet, it is the level of goodwill that exists in the relationship which determines the depth and strength of the relationship.

Granted, we are all mortal. We make mistakes. That’s part of life and learning. Knowing when you are wrong and admitting your mistakes prevents the wounds that you’ve might have caused in others from festering and allows them to heal. When appropriate, sincere apology will keep accounts in the positive, allowing you to maintain the balance in the account.

What can we learn from the EBA?
What can we take away from the concept of the EBA? We are reminded that people, not material possessions, are the real deal. Walt Disney is right when he says: “You can design and create, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality”.

Secondly, the EBA reminds us to be ‘other-centred’. Being other-centred is the first step to ‘seeking first to understand, then to be understood.’ (Covey, Effective habit #1) If we constantly make deposits into the accounts of everyone whom we interact with everyday, the account (trust) will be healthy and so will the relationship.

For those who work in the banking sector, you cannot take an overdraft if your EBA with your colleague is zero or in the red. But you can freely deposit goodwill and trust into another person’s account and it won’t cost you a real cent; just sincerity, honesty and, yes, love.

Some of us who grow up in an environment jostling and fighting for the survival of the fittest might perhaps find this entire concept bordering on the regions of naiveté. These hopefully small category of people might also constantly draw from other people’s accounts. We have heard of the phrase ‘give and take.’ However, this minority just take, take and take. They drain the account. We call this person a ‘very draining person’ (VDP). Positive Psychology teaches us to stay away such people because they drain the lifeforce from any body and organisation.

There is a movie which illustrates the concept of the EBA. I draw our attention to the critically acclaimed 2001 movie, Pay It Forward. Like some other kids, 12-year-old Trevor McKinney believed in the goodness of human nature. Like many other kids, he was determined to change the world for the better. Unlike most other kids, he succeeded. In fact, what started as a movie ended up as a real movement in the United States and in other parts of the world. Check out this website: [www.payitforwardmovement.org](http://www.payitforwardmovement.org). There is a lot of milk of human kindness going around the world indeed. The basic principle of paying it forward is the desire to top up the EBA of people around us, especially those who need it.

So, the next time you relate to another person, think of your own account with that person. Is it credit or debit, in the black or in the red? Don’t despair if it is down south. You can do something about it. Top up the person’s account. Do it today. Do it NOW.

References:
- [Covey, Stephen R.](#) Seven, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (2004). Free Press, USA.
- [www.payitforwardmovement.org](http://www.payitforwardmovement.org)