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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS ROLE IN ORGANISATIONAL SUCCESS

by

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'Cogito, ergo sum', said Descartes – 'I think, therefore I am'. If he were living today, he might have said, 'I feel, therefore I am'¹. We exist not only as thinking beings but also as feeling beings. Our feelings or emotions have a powerful effect on our behaviour – perhaps much more than our rational thinking does. In this article I describe the power of emotion at work, how emotional intelligence contributes to the performance of people at work and how training can help to develop it, with particular reference to effective leadership.

Emotion at work

First the feeling, then the thought. The emotional mind is far quicker than the rational mind. This suggests that emotion has a more immediate and perhaps even greater impact on our behaviour than rational thought. However, it's difficult in practice, and perhaps even unrealistic, to separate feeling from thinking. The 'emotional brain', housed in the structure in the limbic system called the amygdala, works very closely with the 'thinking brain' in the pre-frontal cortex. It's well known that effective learning, for example, depends on the interaction between cognitive and emotional processes.

We all experience emotion in our lives, not least at work. Emotion takes both positive, pleasant forms as well as negative, unpleasant forms – for example, joy at gaining a promotion, fear of redundancy, excitement over a new project, anger at one's manager's behaviour, and jealousy over a colleague's success. While emotion has been studied for many decades by psychologists, it hasn't figured much in the study of people at work - until recently. Why? Steve Fineman suggests that the expression of emotion is taboo in Western organisations, where order and efficiency are not to be contaminated by human feelings.²

Michael Eisner, Chairman and CEO of Walt Disney, however, warns of the dangers of ignoring emotion. He says that denying our emotions leads to losing touch with who we are, which in turn leads to shallowness, a lack of authenticity and ignoring our intuition - thus hindering valuable creative expression.³

Emotional reactions may have adverse effects on one's own judgement, task performance and well-being as well as on one's relationships with others. Kevin Daniels suggests that negative emotions, for example, may affect the way managers make major strategic decisions about their organisations.⁴ The heart may rule the head with adverse consequences even at top level in an organisation.

The expression of emotions, however, can have very positive outcomes. For example, excitement is contagious: it can energise others into action. And one's own motivation to achieve may be enhanced by the happiness or joy resulting from achievement in the past.

What is emotional intelligence?

We know a lot about how we think – how we analyse, reason and make decisions. This is what, in the past, we have called 'intelligence', and we have measured it as 'IQ'. However, we've come to recognise that there are many forms of human intelligence – verbal, numerical, spatial, artistic, and so on. Traditional measures of intelligence don't predict success well enough. Only recently have we come to understand and even measure perhaps the most important form of intelligence for human beings – emotional intelligence (EI).

Useful ideas about EI have developed only in the last decade, with concepts such as 'interpersonal intelligence', 'personal intelligence', emotional quotient (EQ), and 'emotional literacy'. But these notions have their roots in the 1920s with the concept of 'social intelligence'⁵, and perhaps even further back, for the Chinese characters for 'intelligence' incorporate those for both 'head' and 'heart'.

John Mayer and Peter Salovey in 1990 were the first to distinguish between a mental skill that could be regarded as EI and personality traits such as sociability and warmth.⁶ Their model, linking emotion and thought, proposed four dimensions: identifying, using, understanding and managing emotions.

Daniel Goleman formulated the best-known theory of emotional intelligence in 1995. According to Goleman, emotional intelligence is not about IQ but about how well we handle ourselves and our relationships, how well we work in a team, and our ability to lead other people.⁷ He says it's our ability to recognise our own feelings and those of others, to motivate ourselves, and to manage our emotions.⁸ Research by Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis, has identified four dimensions of EI: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills.⁹

Another theory of emotional intelligence was put forward in 1997 by Ayman Sawaf and Robert Cooper. They define emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, understand and effectively use emotions.¹⁰ They suggest that there are three broad aspects of emotional intelligence – emotional literacy, emotional competencies, and values and beliefs.

More recent work by Vic Dulewicz and Malcolm Higgs suggests there are seven dimensions of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, emotional resilience, motivation, interpersonal sensitivity, influence and persuasion, decisiveness, and conscientiousness and integrity.¹¹

Isn't 'emotional intelligence' merely a recycling of what we used to call the 'soft' skills of management and leadership? Isn't it just another case of old wine in new bottles? Charles Woodruffe believes it is.¹² I don't believe this is so. 'EI' brings together existing ideas in a useful way, though admittedly some of the claims made by popular writers on EI are excessive and unproven. The so-called 'soft' human skills refer to *interpersonal* intelligence – relating to others – whereas emotional intelligence also involves *intrapersonal* intelligence – knowing oneself. Understanding oneself is necessary before one can understand others.

Professor John W. Hunt at the London Business School, however, is also critical of EI or, more precisely, what Daniel Goleman writes about EI, which he says describes 'a process for social control; an emotional form of bureaucracy; a clinic for consenting adults'.¹³ None of his criticism, however, detracts from what's not only known through research studies but also, as he admits, sheer common sense.

My view of emotional intelligence – in a nutshell – is that it is our ability to recognise and control our own feelings and needs, recognise those of other people, and respond to them constructively and skilfully.

How does EI affect job performance?

Many successful chief executives attest to its importance. And the past few years have witnessed a vast amount of research into emotional intelligence. Recent studies have shown how EQ is more highly related to success than IQ alone. Here are a few of the findings:

- 75% of the reasons why careers get derailed are EI-related.
- EI is twice as important as cognitive (intellectual) or technical skills for high job performance, and at the top level almost all-important (findings from profiles of top executives in 15 global companies including IBM, Pepsico and Volvo).
- IQ accounts for as little as 4% of exceptional leadership, job performance and achievement; EI may account for over 90%.
- 70% of the reasons for losing clients or customers is EI-related.
- Owner-managers in small and medium-size enterprises with low emotional intelligence have been found to hold back their companies' growth by trying to hold on to total control. Such managers displayed high independence, low trust, low empathy and high aggression, as well as extremely high stress.
- Studies have quantified the benefits of using EI competency profiles, with savings at PepsiCo and a telecommunications firm amounting to £3 million and £1 million in recruiting senior managers and computer programmers respectively.
- A study of 100 management and business leaders in the UK over seven years revealed that emotional intelligence was more highly related to success than IQ was.¹⁴ And taken together, EQ and IQ predict managerial success even better.
- A study of 116 university undergraduates in a simulated job selection exercise showed that, in addition to IQ and practical intelligence, some aspects of EI, in particular empathy, contribute in interviews to positive interview decisions.
- EI competencies are strongly associated with achievement and the bottom line.

According to Goleman, high IQ makes you a brilliant teacher or financial analyst, but high IQ *and* high EQ make you their leader.¹⁵ Leadership guru Warren Bennis concurs, saying that IQ is a threshold competency: it's necessary for success as a leader but it's not sufficient without EI to achieve success.¹⁶ EI makes the difference.

Intellect – verbal, numerical and thinking skills – is important for effective leadership. But emotional intelligence *enables* the intellect to function, once the contagion of negative emotion is dissipated or controlled. Effective leadership truly engages the head and the heart – emotions as well as intellect and reason.

Can we train people in EI?

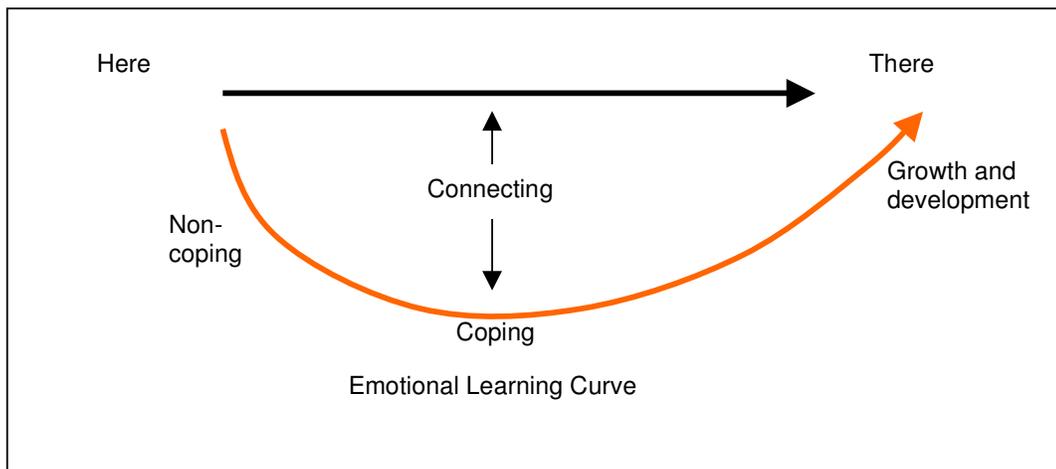
Managerial learning is emotional, and the traditional cognitive approach has ignored this, says Steve Fineman¹⁷ – a view shared by Daniel Goleman. The understanding we now have about the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership – indeed in all aspects of effective interpersonal relationships – has led to new and improved leadership development programmes. We even see MBA programmes that include components relating to EI, such as the Henley MBA¹⁸ and The Leadership Trust/Strathclyde MBA in Leadership Studies.

Can emotional intelligence be learned? Research evidence suggests strongly that it can be. For example, in a study by The Landmark Forum and The Talent Foundation, 100 people attended a 3½-day EI course and were compared with 100 people who didn't do so. They showed significantly higher levels of motivation, self-esteem and confidence than those in the control group.¹⁹ In another study the EI training of supervisors in a manufacturing plant in the USA resulted in reduction of lost-time accidents by 50%, reduction of formal grievances from an average of 15 per year to three per year, and the exceeding of productivity goals by \$250,000.²⁰ And financial advisers in American Express who had undergone training in emotional intelligence improved sales by up to 20%.²¹

What does it take for emotional intelligence to be learned? There's no natural link between self-awareness and self-control. The emotionally intelligent leader displays both characteristics. But self-aware people can also display arrogance and a lack of humility. Such people may not be willing or able to manage their emotions or adapt their behaviour, regardless of the feedback on its impact that they're receiving. The consequence can be an intellectual giant who cannot lead and develop a high-performing team owing to a lack of emotional intelligence.

At The Leadership Trust we believe that emotional development along an emotional learning curve – shown below – is even more important than an intellectual understanding of what we want to achieve.

The Emotional Learning Curve



Consider empowerment. Most people probably buy into empowerment – intellectually. But the two greatest enemies of empowerment are fear of losing control and lack of trust. These are emotional responses. It's only when we learn to manage our emotions and have the courage to make changes that we can be truly empowering – and empowered.

Consider values. Most of us have a professed set of values, and many of our organisations have published values statements. While we may fully understand the meaning of the words, they're easy to articulate and cost nothing to do so. In reality their application is more difficult. It's our actions and behaviour that are the issue. And it's our emotional blockages, rather than the intellectual ones, that we have to deal with. For example, at The Leadership Trust we have worked with a large multinational company over the past three years which professed several simple values, one of which was openness. Everybody accepted this value – intellectually. However, 'telling it like it is' was easier said than done. Values are made a reality only by making progress along the 'corporate' emotional learning curve.

A useful starting point in leadership development, therefore, is to understand what stops people – managers – from becoming effective leaders. Once we know the psychological barriers to effective leadership and effective leadership development, we can use psychological techniques to overcome them and develop the cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills needed. Distinguished psychologist Professor Norman Dixon says that the psychological barriers to effective leadership are...

- Low self-esteem – which leads to lack of motivation. The 19th century father of modern psychology, William James, defined self-esteem as the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities. Self-esteem is a powerful motivator.
- Lack of self-confidence – as a result of not coming to terms with oneself, which in turn leads to lack of confidence in other people;
- Fear of failure, shame or social disapproval;
- Cognitive constriction – thinking 'inside the box' and over-rationalisation, leading to 'paralysis by analysis';
- Adverse consequences of stress – cognitive, managerial and physical.²²

These psychological barriers can be removed in leadership development programmes through experiential learning in teams. The process at The Leadership Trust involves generating or surfacing anxiety by imposing challenging tasks in work-related leadership projects such as a business simulation and physical activities which include rock climbing, scuba diving or caving and field projects. Anxiety is extinguished by enabling participants to discover their personal strengths. The focus is on handling aggression, resolving conflict, reviewing individual and team performance, and establishing effective working relationships. The tasks and activities comprise defining and solving problems, establishing objectives, planning, organising team and physical resources, and implementing team action. Competition among teams is fostered but without risk of ego damage, and group dynamics among participants are facilitated. Finally, an underlying rationale for programme activities is presented for cognitive and emotional buy-in to the process.

Several psychological techniques and processes are used in this process:

- Desensitisation

The gradual overcoming of fear and anxiety by equally gradual increases in difficulty of the tasks and activities, with the surmounting of each hazard being reinforced by approval and an increment in personal satisfaction.

- Reinforcement theory

Emphasis on reward and recognition for effort and progress, not results, rather than punishment and blame, to bring about desired changes in behaviour, feelings and attitudes. Activity and task reviews are conducted in a positive, friendly, non-recriminatory and democratic way to build self-esteem.

- Psychoanalytical re-enactment

Reviews of what was done and what, if anything, went wrong, with minimal interference from the tutor, who primarily asks open questions of the team. This is a process of self-discovery.

- Acquisition of social skills

Focuses mainly on trust and honesty and uses a socialisation model called *Spectrum*. The rationale is that self-esteem leads to honesty, and honesty leads to trust. Humour is liberally used. Humour, says Professor Adrian Furnham, is a useful defence mechanism, can help people to cope with threats, and can increase group cohesiveness.²³

Humour discharges hostility to negative feedback in building self-awareness and consequently self-esteem.

- Group dynamics theory

Teams are formed of up to members, each with its own identity, facilities and resources. They work and eat together, and they compete with one another. Team members develop cohesiveness through mutual helping, protection, support and friendships.

The outcome invariably is increased self-awareness, self-control and self-confidence as a leader.

A major contribution to enhancing self-awareness as a basis for personal development as an effective leader has come from 360-degree feedback. Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe says that bosses and subordinates have very different views of what managerial behaviours are important: bosses tend to emphasise task-oriented skills like decision making and problem solving, whereas subordinates emphasise visionary leadership and interpersonal skills such as sensitivity and empowerment.²⁴

The success of programmes and courses that aim to develop emotional intelligence in leaders depends on the degree to which participants can make progress along their own individual emotional learning curves. In our programmes at The Leadership Trust we follow several key principles in helping participants to develop their emotional intelligence:

- Create situations that heighten individuals' self-awareness and give them the opportunity to reflect on how they might manage their emotions more effectively more of the time.
- Create a learning environment that allows and encourages them to reflect on their emotions and key emotional blocks and to develop personal strategies to handle and overcome these.
- Don't try to 'change' people. People are a product of their genes and environment, and this leaves people with their own emotional drivers. All that we do is to allow and encourage them to see the consequences of those drivers through the impact they have on others. They make their own decisions about what to do with that information.
- Give them full responsibility for their own learning. After all, to develop emotional intelligence requires us to take responsibility for ourselves and our behaviour.
- Give people a safe, expertly-facilitated learning environment so that they can push themselves out of their comfort zones and challenge their current attitudes. As a result, participants gain the courage and self-confidence to apply this in the work environment.
- Allow and encourage participants to reflect on the emotional needs of other people and on how they can develop the emotional intelligence skills of empathy and trust to work more effectively with their work colleagues.

Emotional intelligence is learned and developed mainly through the natural process of maturing as a human being. But training can help with skills such as listening, questioning and body language and in enhancing self-awareness, awareness of others, self-control and self-confidence. Developing EI in our relationships at work is perhaps the single most important training activity today.

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Endnotes

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