

On the Job With Emotional Intelligence

Stan Emelander

“The leader’s fundamental act is to induce people to be aware or conscious of what they feel—to feel their true needs so strongly, to define their values so meaningfully, that they can be moved to purposeful action.”

—James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*

The concept of emotional intelligence continues to gain acceptance as an important factor affecting leader effectiveness. Since the theory’s introduction and popularization in the 1990s, numerous studies show that being able to perceive, evaluate, and regulate feelings makes managers and leaders more effective and that team members with a higher sense of emotional awareness and control outperform those lacking these traits.

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Emotional intelligence, sometimes labeled “social intelligence,” seems to have a part in every recent article, study, book, and video on leadership. One of the pioneering researchers and authors on emotional intelligence, Peter Salovey, recently was nominated to be president of Yale University, demonstrating the theory’s recognition by the mainstream. There’s more to the theory than making people feel good—it draws from behavioral and brain science to describe why feelings arise as well as the importance of managing them. This article provides an orientation to emotional intelligence and offers advice on how to build capacity for it and put it to use. As a start, we can note that emotions have only recently been recognized as having a legitimate role in the workplace.

The development of management theory began with a mechanistic, relatively simple perspective toward workers. The traditional command-and-control (Theory X) perspective toward motivation holds that employees dislike working, require close supervision, and are best encouraged with explicit material rewards. In this scenario, all people are thought to be out for themselves, with economic gain providing their core motivation. Theory X managers believe that employees find work disagreeable, resulting in cynicism and other emotions that should be suppressed. This perspective fits neatly with scientific management, the study of work flows and physical movements, with a goal of maximizing efficiency of production. In my experience, although the Theory X approach is viewed as outdated and even quaint in academia, it is alive and well in the workplace.

Progressing beyond the mechanistic perspective, multiple research-supported theories from the 1950s to the pres-

ent increasingly emphasize aligning individual and organizational values, and the relationship between worker fulfillment and organizational effectiveness. All post-Theory X approaches to work recognize motivation and engagement as important components of worker effectiveness and organizational achievement. Perhaps the most popular theory, Transformational Leadership, was introduced by Pulitzer Prize-winner James McGregor Burns in his seminal 1978 book *Leadership*. Engagement, as noted by Burns, happens at an emotional level. Feelings are a part of what motivates us, and managers, especially those one level above any worker (e.g., many project managers), play an outsized role in shaping feelings and influencing how employees feel about their work.

Emotional Intelligence Attributes

Inquiry into emotional intelligence began with observations that people seem to possess intelligence in diverse areas such as language, mathematics, and music. Whether these are true intelligences, or the application of general intelligence in different domains (i.e., learned skills), is a topic of debate. What’s undebatable is that people, depending on their focus and native skill, have different levels of ability. Some people possess a high native sensitivity and capability for successfully perceiving and dealing with emotions. This capability—emotional intelligence—applies to both one’s self and others, and it includes the perception, interpretation, regulation, and response to emotions.

The above definition encompasses two dimensions—objects and capabilities. Objects include one’s self and others, while capabilities include awareness and response. The interaction between these dimensions results in four attributes, directed towards one’s self and others, described as follows:

- **Self-awareness**—recognizing your own emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behavior, knowing your strengths and weaknesses, and possessing awareness of how you respond in different circumstances.
- **Self-management**—controlling impulsive feelings and behaviors; managing emotions in healthy ways, resulting in self-confidence and motivation. This includes taking the initiative, following through on commitments, and adapting to changing circumstances.
- **Other awareness (empathy)**—understanding the emotions, needs, and concerns of other people; picking up on emotional cues; feeling comfortable socially; and recognizing the power dynamics in a group or organization.
- **Relationship management**—knowing when the introduction of emotion is effective and beneficial. Includes developing and maintaining good relationships, communicating clearly, inspiring and influencing others, working well in teams, and managing conflict.

Whether emotional intelligence is true intelligence or a learned skill is a subject of debate, but its effectiveness in the workplace is well recognized.

Applying Emotional Intelligence

Perhaps the most intuitive application of emotional intelligence is in continually sensing and responding effectively to others' emotions. This use builds morale in individuals and contributes to employee impressions of the workplace as a place of support. One of the foremost benefits of emotional intelligence is trust building. Trust results from the favorable assessment of another's intentions, reliability, and effectiveness. The first two components relate to the emotional attribute of self-management. Expressions of support and good intentions, for instance, are only effective when communicated at the right time with genuine feeling. This genuineness of expression is a facet of emotional intelligence.

Often, it is episodes of high emotion, including outbursts or put-downs, that create the most lasting impressions about the work environment, and particularly about managers.

Unpleasant events, particularly shocks or outbursts, are deeply memorable because they stimulate the amygdala, an area of the brain responsible for intense emotional reactions. The amygdala is responsible for the "fight or flight" response that includes redirection of blood away from the brain to muscles and the release of adrenaline. When we perceive a threat that stimulates the amygdala, referred to as an "amygdala hijack," a term coined by Daniel Coleman in his 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence*, the emotion is accompanied by physical changes that include strong sensations. The sensations can reinforce our feelings and cognitions about the threat, making it a truly memorable experience. With our blood-depleted brains and a system awash in adrenaline, we are in poor shape to make a reasoned response to the threat. Self-monitoring to recognize symptoms of feeling threatened (including dry mouth, flushed skin, and raised voices) and framing an appropriate response (stepping back from a confrontation, making the conversation safe) can help put the thinking part of our brains, the neocortex, back in charge. Emotional intelligence also has exceptional application for team-based work leaders, including project and program managers.

At least two aspects of teamwork suggest a strong role for emotional intelligence. The first is the team life cycle model (storming, norming, performing, adjourning) pioneered by Bruce Tuckman in 1965. Appropriately handling emotions during the storming and norming phases is an asset for helping teams transition quickly to effective performance. The second aspect concerns team decision making and creativity, often

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achieved through constructive conflict. Teams always have the potential to be more creative than individuals—if they are not torn apart by disagreement. Potentially beneficial conflict is directed toward issues and concepts, while disruptive disagreement is directed toward persons, provoking animosity and hindering team effectiveness. Disagreements always carry the seeds of stress, and emotional intelligence can be essential for keeping team conflict healthy and focused on issues, not on individuals.

Building Emotional Intelligence

Similar to how active listening skills can grow with practice, emotional intelligence skills can become habits with practice over time. A difference with emotional intelligence is that half of the skill building will be inner-directed.

I am a fan of the "fake it until you make it" method. Even though I may not feel like an emotionally aware individual, when I practice acting like one, I move closer to the desired competence. To employ this tactic, it's most useful to have a template of behavior, such as the following:

- Assess your feelings throughout the day, looking for sources of your moods and feelings. Is your mood the same at a day's beginning and end? Before and after lunch or a long meeting? Learn how to label your emotions.
- Observe your reactions to other people; note the physical signs and sensations. Do you raise your voice when upset? What happens when you lower it?
- Assess your behavior in your environment, including attention seeking, humility, and selflessness. Ask, "How am I showing up?"

- Identify the positive emotional results from making decisions or achieving goals.
- Attend to your reactions to stressful circumstances.
- Look for positives, not just negatives, in situations and work outcomes. How can challenges lead to improvements?
- Assume responsibility for your actions; engage in active problem solving rather than worry.
- Before you act, assess how your behaviors will affect others.
- Identify leaders who model the behaviors to which you aspire.

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Emotional intelligence is related strongly to leadership; indeed, it is often identified as the most important attribute of successful leaders. Leadership is sometimes defined as the ability to motivate people to action, even in the absence of the leader; and it's the emotional appeal of a leader's values, goals, and vision that stirs followers.

The transformational leadership model, emphasizing the leader's communication of a vision and development of followers, shares much in common with emotional intelligence theory. The core appeal of the leader's vision is emotional and value-based; lacking those qualities, the vision can ring hollow. The follower's buy-in to the leader's program of self-development depends on the authenticity of the message, which in turn depends on the perceived genuineness and trustworthiness

of the leader. Charisma, the quality of providing attractive emotional stimulation, is identified with the most successful transformational leaders. Charisma can be thought of as the exercise of the relationship management dimension of emotional intelligence. The goal of transformational leadership always entails change, both for the organization as a whole and for individual followers. Planning and leading change relies on effectively communicating the rationale for change and expressing support and optimism—emotional intelligence skills for those being affected. Leadership development includes modeling desired behaviors, most of which are related to emotional intelligence.

I recently attended a workshop in which government managers were asked to list three attributes of leaders they worked with and admired. The attributes then were sorted into three categories and added. The scores were: Intelligence Related-10; Technical Skill-20; Emotion Related-42. When I ask students to name the attributes of leaders they most admire, answers like "supportive," "approachable," and "trustworthy" dominate. The results of these informal surveys underscore to me the importance of emotional intelligence. The feelings they inspire in us are more important than raw ability or technical know-how. Leaders need to realize that a memorable legacy is founded on what they cause followers to feel, and attending to emotional intelligence can help achieve that goal. 

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