

## Emotional Intelligence: The Key to Leadership Success

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It takes a special kind of ability to know yourself and how your actions impact those around you.

By Jan Richards

*"Great coaches or teachers often display simple virtues like generosity of spirit, giving others the gift of their presence. They also seem to have the kind of clarity of mind that gets to the heart of the matter, the honesty and integrity to say what they know to be true, together with the compassion to do no harm. They have a basic human wisdom in dealing with countless situations. When we leave them, we feel inspired, empowered, and enabled to take effective action"* (Hargrove 2003).

We have all known such leaders, who exert a kind of quiet power and influence that we admire. They demonstrate a high level of what Daniel Goleman (1995) calls *emotional intelligence*, a quality he believes is twice as important as IQ in predicting career success.

Assuming that emotional intelligence is directly linked to leadership success, we must consider these three questions:

- What is emotional intelligence?
- Why is it important?
- How can you increase it?

### What Is Emotional Intelligence?

“Emotional intelligence is the basis for such personal qualities as realistic self-confidence, integrity, knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses, resilience in times of change or adversity, self-motivation, perseverance, and the knack for getting along well with others” (Cherniss and Adler 2000). Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to motivate themselves and persist when frustrated. They can regulate their moods so that distress does not overwhelm their ability to think. They are empathetic, positive, hopeful, and self-confident.

Goleman (1995) suggests that there are four clusters of important competencies that make up emotional intelligence and that these competencies are connected with the ability to manage oneself and handle relationships successfully.

***Self-awareness*** is the core of emotional intelligence. Leaders who are self-aware know their strengths and limitations; they have the ability to stay true to their own feelings, values, and vision. They use emotion in their decision-making process and tend to be reflective. These leaders also are aware of areas that need improvement and make continuous improvement a priority in their lives.

To recognize your emotions and their effect, you need to take time to reflect on how your actions match your values. Know your inner resources, abilities, and limits. Emotionally intelligent leaders know themselves well, are aware of their limits, and know where they need to improve.

***Self-management.*** Leaders who manage their emotions well have the ability to remain optimistic and to maintain self-control. They find ways to manage negative emotions and impulses and to persist in seeking goals despite obstacles and setbacks. They value initiative and innovation and are not afraid of failure. Such a leader is perceived as transparent and authentic, a person with integrity who will do the right thing—even if it's unpopular.

Good self-managers take responsibility for their actions. They seek high-performance achievement and self-improvement. They strive to be conscientious, organized, and careful about their work, and to be punctual, self-disciplined, and helpful. They know that making needed changes will require persistence and the ability to bounce back.

***Social awareness.*** Socially aware leaders are able to read power relationships and networks—an ability that helps them manage conflict and avoid pitfalls. They respect the underlying norms and values of their school and district. They are empathetic and are seen as interested in others and what they are feeling. They relate well to people from varied backgrounds and can understand multiple perspectives in a conflict situation. Empathetic leaders give positive and negative feedback in a way that is supportive and helpful. They know that the more teachers feel such support, the more trust, attachment, effort, and loyalty they will display.

***Relationship management.*** Sensing what others are feeling without their saying so is the essence of empathy, and the prerequisite for empathy is self-awareness—knowing and displaying your own feelings. For example, researchers have found that when we see a happy face (or an angry one), we tend to feel a corresponding emotion. We all influence each other's moods and with every contact we are making the other person feel better or worse. That is why empathy is the foundation skill for relationship management.

Successful leaders understand the *Pygmalion effect*—that expecting the best from people is often a self-fulfilling prophecy. These leaders are talented in conflict management and in encouraging teamwork and collaboration. Those high in social skills encourage debate and open discussion, and have a knack for handling difficult people.

People with good social skills know how to manage and express emotion in ways that inspire peak performance in others. They are positive and outgoing, emotionally expressive, and dramatic. They seem warm and sociable, friendly, and demonstrative. They know when to be assertive and are not uncomfortable with confrontation or anger.

## Why Is Emotional Intelligence Important?

When researchers asked teachers to describe the worst mistakes administrators make, the most frequently mentioned were poor human relations skills, poor interpersonal communication skills, lack of vision, and avoidance of conflict (Bulach, Boothe, and Pickett 1997). A recent study of 99 California public schools agreed, concluding that *failure to communicate in ways that build positive relationships* is the No. 1 reason principals lose their jobs.

Emotional intelligence can make the difference between administrators who are successful in getting people to follow their leadership, cooperate, and work together, and school leaders who are ineffective, undistinguished, or failing at the job. We have a critical shortage of principals and our schools need leaders with the social skills needed to effect positive school change.

## How Can You Increase Your Emotional Intelligence?

The good news is that our emotional intelligence is not a fixed trait but continues to develop as we learn from our experiences. According to Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002), these are the five discoveries that leaders can use to build emotional intelligences:

- My ideal self: Who do I want to be?
- My real self: Who am I? What are my strengths and gaps?
- My learning agenda: How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
- Experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
- Developing supportive and trusting relationships.

Learn to know your emotional self. You might try spending time in quiet meditation or reflection every morning, focusing on the kind of leader you admire and want to emulate. What are your strengths and gaps? Work on one area of competencies that would most impact your performance. Once you become aware of your focus goal, practice that new behavior or attitude. Find a mentor or trusted friend to share your insights. All change feels uncomfortable at first, but as you practice, your new behavior will strengthen your ability to become an emotionally intelligent leader.

## References

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## **WEB RESOURCES**

EQ Directory is a leading directory of emotional intelligence sites, sources, and organizations. On this site, you will find a collection of free online tests that focus on your optimism, satisfaction with your job, etc. [www.eq.org](http://www.eq.org)

The Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Assessment (SEI) helps people understand and develop emotional intelligence. The comprehensive report offers many practical strategies for performance improvement. [www.6seconds.org/sei/](http://www.6seconds.org/sei/)

EQ Toolbox offers resources for developing emotional intelligence projects in organizations and communities. [www.eqtoolbox.org](http://www.eqtoolbox.org)

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