



Control Yourself

What role does emotional intelligence play in leadership?

by **Stephen Xavier**

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When executive performance falls short of expectations, intervention usually focuses on the technical or managerial skills required in the role where the suspected deficiency has occurred. What is typically missing is an accurate assessment of how the executive's softer qualities, such as self-awareness and relationship-building abilities may be impacting his or her performance. This is a common and unfortunate oversight because in most cases, the softer skills have a positive impact on an effective leader's repertoire.

Fifteen years ago, Harvard professor David McClelland conducted research that compared exceptional employees to their average counterparts. The results led to the identification of a number of competencies held in common by the highest performers. Based on McClelland's research, psychologists John Mayer and Peter Salovey coined the term "Emotional Intelligence." The concept remained academic until Daniel Goleman brought it down to earth in his books *Emotional Intelligence* and *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. In the latter, he demonstrated how critical emotional intelligence (EI) is in the workplace and particularly in leaders.

Components of Emotional Intelligence

EI (or "EQ") may be the key attribute that distinguishes outstanding performers from the merely adequate in the workplace. Research by Goleman (2000), Cavallo and Brienza (2001) and Cherniss (2001) observed 3871 executives in companies such as Johnson & Johnson and American Express. In some cases, managers who had completed EI training were compared to those who had not. The research revealed that executives deficient in EI were rarely ranked as outstanding on annual performance reviews and that their divisions underperformed by an average of about 20 percent, while those exhibiting higher EI scores were rated as high performers. In fact, EI not just affects the success of those trained directly, but of their subordinates. At American Express, financial advisors who worked for EI-trained managers increased their business by 18.1 percent compared to 16.2 percent in groups headed by managers untrained in EI.

EI is not a complex model. It rests on the simple fact that, although business is business, people in the

workplace are still human. Regardless of environment, everyone is driven by emotions that function almost like an internal engine. However, it is important to note that EI is not about being able to show emotions such as happiness, anger or sadness, but about a leader's ability to effectively *manage* his or her own emotions, as well as his or her relationships with others.

EI breaks down into four components; the first two are self-management abilities; the remaining two are interpersonal skills.

- 1. Self-awareness.** Leaders with a high degree of self-awareness accurately assess their own strengths and weaknesses. They have high self-confidence, yet are not afraid to admit their limitations.
- 2. Self-management.** Leaders who rank high on this trait can control their impulses and channel them for good purposes. They are flexible and can readily adapt to changing internal and external conditions. Since they have a passion for achievement for its own sake, not just in response to incentives or external pressures, they generally find it easy to overcome obstacles. They are also trustworthy because their values, emotions and behaviors are in alignment.
- 3. Social awareness.** Skilled leaders sense the emotions of others and understand their perspective. They are also able to read the currents of organizational life and to recognize and meet customers' needs.
- 4. Social skills.** Goleman views this skill as the culmination of the other three. It includes the strong communication skills and abilities needed to influence, take charge, manage change and conflict, develop others and move teams toward desired outcomes. However, it is not a matter of being "sociable." Social skill is "friendliness with a purpose," says Goleman. The importance of social skill extends past the interaction with employees, peers and bosses to customer relationships. People in sales or customer service positions, for example, need

excellent social skills in order to anticipate customers' needs so they can meet or exceed them.

As the demand for leadership excellence grows, the importance of strengthening EI increases. Fortunately, EI can be developed or further enhanced through thoughtful, focused leadership development. However, traditional training programs cannot boost EI, says Goleman. What it takes is extended practice, feedback from colleagues, coaching and the executive's drive to make the necessary changes.

Hands-on EI

Executives who have experienced the power of EI in leadership effectiveness also recognize that it is worthwhile to help employees leverage these same skills. However, when individuals measure low in EI, their direct supervisors are not always the best people to provide direction. Take the case of a VP at a global aerospace company. Her boss, the SVP, had received many complaints about her from colleagues who found her to be unreasonably demanding and demeaning. He did not really believe that she could change, but agreed to hire a coach to develop her EI.

An EI assessment of the VP and a survey of her coworkers revealed that she scored very high on self-awareness, but extremely low in the other domains, especially social awareness. When confronted with these findings, she was initially guarded, pointed and defensive. However, with coaching and practice, her EI soon increased to a point where she recognized her interpersonal shortcomings and acknowledged them to all concerned. She then worked on creating disciplined behaviors and approaches for dealing more appropriately with her colleagues and rehearsed them with a coach. She learned techniques such as breathing slowly, "holding her tongue," counting to five before responding and learning how to ask questions to probe for a deeper understanding of a colleague's issue rather than badgering them. None of this came easily. However, almost immediately she received unsolicited positive feedback on her new approach, which reinforced these new behaviors.

Unfortunately, her boss also rated very low on EI. He had expected her development efforts to fail to

provide an excuse for firing her. Therefore, no matter how much she changed and how well others responded to her new approach, he continued to find fault. Since he was not open to developing his own EI, the VP eventually decided to leave the company and, due to her high EI, achieved great success with another employer. The boss remains in his position and if history is any indicator of future pathways, he is still dealing with "difficult employees" and will continue to do so until his own development becomes a high priority.

One of the reasons why EI was not factored into leadership success prior to Goleman's work is that "emotional health" was considered too personal for the workplace. However, the idea behind EI is not to be emotional at work, but rather to harness one's own emotions and those of others for the benefit of the organization. Similarly, the development of EI is not a matter of therapy, which does not belong in the workplace, but of executive development with the "emotional self" not being completely excluded from the equation. Research has clearly demonstrated that leaders who appreciate the power of EI in the workplace have an advantage over those who ignore this strategy.

A Tool for Playing Smarter

EI is not just a theory, nor is it the latest fad *du jour*. The need to develop EI will be here to stay as long as emotions are part of being human. Executives with highly developed EI are aware of their emotions and how they play into their performance and interpersonal relationships. This awareness enables them to harness their emotions and put them to good use. The presence or absence of EI also explains why some leaders are highly successful even without a great deal of formal education while others are unsuccessful despite high IQ, advanced degrees and superb analytical or technical skills. The better leaders understand themselves and can channel their emotions, the more effective they will be at building productive relationships with others for the benefit of the organization. EI is one of today's most innovative tools for creating stronger leaders and companies and it's a development trend that is here to stay. ■

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