Your Future Gets Brighter With Emotional Intelligence

A high EQ is essential to keeping your career on an upward path.

Ever wonder why some of the most brilliant and ambitious leaders derail their careers, while those with less obvious “IQ” skills climb the leadership ladder? I once asked the very same question. During the last 25 years, I have coached healthcare executives in hospital, pharmaceutical, insurance, professional association and research settings. All of these individuals were deemed high achievers by their peers and clearly part of the “leadership bench.” But some of them did not have the emotional intelligence (EI) to match and ended up inadvertently harming their careers as a result of unhealthy behaviors and habits.

Because leaders achieve organizational goals through others, you may conclude leaders have excellent people skills. However, sometimes this is not the case: Many leaders are promoted for their technical knowledge, discrete achievements and seniority, rather than for their charisma or influencing skills. This is not good for employee engagement, organizational resilience or innovation. Let’s explore this further: Read the following scenarios and then ask yourself, “What emotion do I feel?”

- You were selected to oversee the implementation of the Affordable Care Act due to your analytical and execution skills. Your colleagues tell your boss that you spend your time lecturing instead of listening to them. You interrupt others and work from your agenda.

- You are known as the person who always says “yes” and takes on extra work or completes others’ tasks. You feel unappreciated and burned out. You wish you could just have one weekend to yourself.

- You are in a meeting and a colleague takes credit for your project’s success. This seems to happen often, especially with this colleague.

There is no escaping our emotions. Whether we like what we feel or not, we are emotional creatures. Daniel Goleman, author of Working with Emotional Intelligence and The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights is the leading authority in EI. Goleman’s premise is that sensitivity to emotional states (one’s own and others’) and effective relationship skills are the critical competencies in today’s healthcare environments. EI is a skill every employer wants and every leader needs.

Emotional Intelligence Starts With You

The essence of EI is awareness, transparency and vulnerability. EI is the ability to cope with setbacks, remain optimistic, elicit charisma (positive attraction) and stay purposeful even when things are not going well. EI does not mean that you have to be “soft” or “emotional.” EI simply gives you the tools to identify and build on career strengths, remove barriers, understand your limits, focus on solutions and, when necessary, call the foul.

EI begins with you and impacts others you are leading or involved with. EI is your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships. It affects how you navigate social complexities and make decisions that achieve positive connections and results. Most experts agree that EI is composed of four core skills that are paired under two primary competencies, self and others, and two behavioral lenses, awareness and management (see chart on page 74).

Self (personal) competence is how we know and manage our strengths and limitations. Self-awareness is the ability to perceive emotions accurately and be aware of them as they happen. Self-management is the ability to use emotional awareness to positively direct your behavior. Other (social)
competence is how we manage our relationships to achieve results with people. Social awareness is the ability to understand people’s emotions/needs along with organizational “mood” to deepen relationships and increase business outcomes. Relationship management is the ability to use awareness of your own and others’ emotions to inspire and engage greatness.

**Emotional Moments of Truth**

EI boils down to how well you create positive emotional moments of truth. Research indicates that only 36 percent of people tested can accurately identify their emotions as they happen. Nearly two-thirds of people are typically controlled by their emotions and are unskilled at using them beneficially.

Our first reaction to any event is always emotional—tapping into our brain’s limbic system. The limbic system is the area of the brain that regulates emotion and memory. It directly connects the lower and higher brain functions. It influences the visceral responses to sensations of fear and hope. EI involves creating new habits by re-training the limbic system. It is managing our “default” style of how we react or what we say and do. Let’s look at a client who learned to create new habits through the EI skills of awareness, transparency and vulnerability.

**EI in Action**

A brilliant research scientist, promoted to manage a team of very smart people, was not achieving targeted organizational goals in a performance-based outcome environment. As part of an EI training and coaching program, he received candid feedback that said his team felt they could never do anything right and that his constant critical analysis of their work was creating a risk-averse climate. While the leader’s strengths as a brilliant researcher, writer and expert in his field were readily acknowledged by his team, they described him as arrogant, aloof and inpatient. Team members stopped trying to offer information or ask for feedback.

The leader agreed to focus first on awareness and management of his strengths and limitations. He agreed to be transparent to his team and acknowledge and, when needed, share vulnerabilities. He agreed to individual and group coaching to reinforce new “default” behaviors. The leader took the EQ-i 2.0, a 360-degree EI assessment that is available through ACHE’s Healthcare Executive Career Center (ACHE.org/Careers). The assessment identified strengths, disruptive behaviors and, most importantly, the perceptual gaps between the leader and his team. The leader shared the following with his team after he completed the assessment:

> I became aware that when I am emotionally hijacked or stressed, I exhibit a directive, intellectual and rational style, debating my “truth” instead of gathering perspective from others. I learned my default style is to intellectualize, analyze and debate everything, focusing initially on the flaws of a decision rather than supporting the implementation. I guess this makes me seem less excited or interested in others’ ideas or feedback than I really am. I can understand how individuals feel that I think I am smarter or superior to them. That is not my intention, but I realize your perception is the reality. I want you to know that when I fall into those habits of behaviors, it is OK for you to let me know the effect it is having on you. Give me feedback about my behavior when I make you feel engaged or disengaged.

As this example demonstrates, achieving goals is only part of the formula for leadership success. Great leaders excel at relationship management because they’re skilled in forming meaningful connections that inspire performance success and career significance.

If leaders cannot genuinely express empathy or expose their vulnerability, it’s that much harder for them to
garner trust and support. You’re prone to ethical failures if you overestimate your intelligence and believe you’ll never get caught. Arrogance distorts your capacity to read situations accurately (see sidebar below).

**Leaders Set the Emotional Tone**
As a leader, your emotional tone either attracts or distracts followership. Our brains are hardwired to cue in (both consciously and unconsciously) to others’ emotional states. This is heightened for leaders. Employees are tuned into a leader’s feelings—the good, the bad and even the really ugly. Employees perform at higher levels with leaders who create a positive emotional climate. The ability to garner this effect is called charisma.

The emotional tone that permeates your organization starts with leadership. When employees feel upbeat, they go the extra mile to service customers. When we feel good, we work better. Feeling good lubricates mental efficiency, facilitating comprehension and complex decision making. Upbeat moods help us feel more optimistic about our ability to achieve a goal, enhance creativity and predispose us to being more helpful and kind.

**Improving Your EI**
EI skills can be learned. However, you cannot simply read books or take an EI assessment. EI career skills require a constant, and often uncomfortable, commitment to stretch outside one’s comfort zone. I often start by teaching leaders the habit of mindfulness. Mindfulness involves the leader becoming purposefully aware of his or her thoughts, feelings and decisions in the present moment, nonjudgmentally. It serves as a pre-requisite to developing awareness and wisdom. The mindful exercise I teach leaders is called “The Pause,” which involves long inhales and exhales with closed eyes. The goal is to quiet the brain, interrupt an emotional hijacking and refocus energy on what is possible.

EI is the foundation for a host of critical employability and leadership skills, and it impacts almost everything you say and do each day. It strongly drives leadership and personal excellence. You can be a top performer without EI, but it is rare.

When I conducted a study of more than 2,000 leaders from around the globe, I found those individuals who were driven by success (defined as driven by being the best in the world) and by significance (defined as driven by being the best for the world) had the ability (charisma) to make emotional or social connections that ignited the passion—or “groove”—in oneself and in others. Once again, chalk it up to EI.

Leaders who are emotionally connected and capable of managing their emotions to attract and not distract greatness will make a difference to the bottom line. Emotional intelligence is a competitive advantage in any healthcare environment.

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<tr>
<th>Low EI Traits vs. High EI Traits</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Leaders With Low EI</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have low impulse control. React and sound off first.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brush off or ignore people when stressed, frustrated or overwhelmed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deny or ignore how events impact emotion and decision making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get defensive when challenged or questioned.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on tasks and ignore the person/context.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are oblivious to tension.</td>
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_Cynthia Kivland, SEI Coach Certification Program, 2011_