



Emotionally Intelligent Leadership, and Why It Matters

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ABSTRACT

In the ever-evolving landscape of leadership, technical expertise and strategic thinking are no longer the sole determinants of success. Today's most effective leaders possess a nuanced and varied skill set that allows them to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, inspire teams, and foster resilient organizational cultures. At the heart of this skill set lies what has come to be known as "Emotional Intelligence", which may be defined as the ability to understand, manage, interpret, and harness emotions in oneself and others.

This article explores the profound connection between emotional intelligence and leadership, examining how EI shapes decision-making, team performance, conflict resolution, employee empowerment, strategic planning, and organizational outcomes. The essential components of emotional intelligence will be examined and analyzed in order to understand its impact on various leadership styles, as well as to highlight real-world examples that illustrate its transformative power.

KEYWORDS: Emotional Intelligence; Training and Development; Customer Service; Client Relations; Leadership; Team Based Performance

Literature Review

Goleman (1995) produced a landmark work that brought emotional intelligence (EI) into the mainstream, highlighting its critical influence on both personal and professional success.

Goleman (2011) builds on his earlier work, focusing on the application of EI in the workplace and providing practical insights for leaders aiming to foster emotionally intelligent organizations.

Harvard Business Review Press (2015) provides a collection of top HBR articles exploring EI's impact on leadership, decision-making, and team dynamics.

Bradberry & Greaves (2009) present the tool "Talent Smart", which offers a framework for assessing and improving EI, with practical strategies tailored for leaders in various types of organizations and industries.

Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough (2009) give a critical examination of whether EI is essential for effective leadership. Their conclusions align with accepted modern-day management practices that EI is indeed an essential part of the "toolbox" that 21st-century managers and leaders must use.

Barbuto, Gottfredson, & Searle (2014) explore how EI influences "servant leadership" behaviors by encouraging managers to consider their employees as their "internal customers", with a mindset of working with them more closely, not necessarily in a superior-subordinate relationship, but more of an equitable, collaborative one.

Clarke (2010) links EI to transformational leadership and project management success. Proven EI tools are discussed that may help managers work with their staff in a more holistic, strategic manner.

Gerhardt, Bauwens, & Van Woerkom (2025) give a systematic review of over a hundred different studies connecting EI to leadership styles, well-being, and performance.

Kahneman (2011) gives deep insights into decision-making and cognitive biases—critical for emotionally intelligent leadership.

Definition of Emotional Intelligence

The term "Emotional Intelligence" was first used by the psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer, and later popularized by Daniel Goleman. Essentially, "emotional intelligence" refers to the capacity to:

- Perceive emotions accurately
- Understand emotional meanings
- Regulate emotions effectively
- Utilize emotions to facilitate thought and behavior.
- Recognize EI in others, especially in the employees who work for a manager, thereby enabling that manager to more effectively lead, guide, motivate, and train his or her staff members.

Goleman's model breaks EI into five key components, which are:

1. Self-Awareness: recognizing one's emotions and their impact
2. Self-Regulation: managing emotions and impulses
3. Motivation: harnessing emotions to pursue goals
4. Empathy: understanding the emotions of others
5. Social Skills: managing relationships and building networks

The above elements form the bedrock of emotionally intelligent leadership and are primary behavioral characteristics of an enlightened, assertive, self-directed, and operationally capable manager.

Emotional Intelligence as a Leadership Compass

When all is said and done, the essence of leadership is fundamentally about influence-guiding others toward a shared vision, helping to ensure that an organization's operational and strategic vision synchronizes and aligns with the emotional, ethical, and personal values of those who work for it. Therefore, building upon this postulate, EI enhances a leader's ability to influence by:

• **Building Trust and Authenticity**

Emotionally intelligent leaders are self-aware and transparent. They acknowledge their strengths and limitations, creating a work culture of honesty, psychological well-being, flexibility, encouragement of new ideas and methodologies, authenticity, and more. This authenticity fosters trust, which is essential for team cohesion, employee loyalty, and operational effectiveness.

• **Enhancing Communication**

Leaders with high EI are adept at reading nonverbal cues, listening actively, and tailoring their communication to different audiences. They can de-escalate conflict and tension, clarify misunderstandings, and inspire emotionally resonant messaging. They manage through facilitation, not agitation.

• **Navigating Conflict**

Conflict is inevitable in any organization. Emotionally intelligent leaders approach conflict with empathy and composure. They seek to understand underlying emotions and motivations, facilitating resolution rather than escalation.

• **Driving Motivation and Engagement**

By recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of their teams, EI-driven leaders create environments where individuals feel valued, understood, and emotionally validated. This emotional validation boosts morale, engagement, retention, employee buy-in, and ultimately, productivity.

Leadership Styles and Emotional Intelligence:

Different leadership styles interact with emotional intelligence in unique ways. It is worthwhile examining a few of these:

1. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders inspire and elevate their followers by appealing to values and emotions. EI is central to this style—empathy, vision, and emotional resonance are key tools for motivating change.

2. Service-Based Leadership

Service-based leaders prioritize the growth and well-being of their teams. High emotional intelligence enables them to listen deeply, empathize, support others selflessly, and encourage new ideas and contributions from their employees in a broad, open-minded, and non-judgmental manner.

3. Democratic Leadership

This style values collaboration and input. Emotionally intelligent democratic leaders foster open dialogue, manage group dynamics, and ensure that all voices are heard.

4. Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leaders make decisions independently and expect compliance. While EI may be less emphasized here, emotionally intelligent autocrats can still benefit from self-regulation and empathy to avoid alienating their teams.

The Business Case for Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

Organizations led by emotionally intelligent leaders often outperform their peers. This is done in a variety of ways. Below are a few such ways.

- **Improved Team Performance**, by fostering collaboration, reducing friction, and enhancing morale. Teams led by emotionally intelligent leaders are more cohesive, innovative, and resilient.
- **Better Decision-Making**, enabling self-aware leaders to recognize biases and emotional triggers that may cloud

judgment. They make more balanced, ethical, and strategic decisions.

- **Higher Employee Retention**, whereby employees are more likely to stay in environments where they feel understood and supported. EI-driven leadership reduces burnout and turnover.

Stronger Organizational Culture

Empathy and social skills contribute to inclusive, respectful workplaces. EI leaders model behaviors that shape positive cultural norms. They understand that you cannot influence and motivate people to do things you want them to do unless you understand their emotional compass and can help them get in touch with it. This will assist them in understanding that it is in their best interest, as well as that of the organization for which they work, to align your agenda with their emotional compass.

Emotional Intelligence in Action: Some Examples

Satya Nadella – Microsoft

When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft, he emphasized empathy as a core leadership value. His emotionally intelligent approach transformed Microsoft's culture, fostering collaboration and innovation. Under his leadership, the company saw a resurgence in growth and employee satisfaction.

Healthcare Leadership

In high-stress environments like hospitals, emotionally intelligent leadership is crucial. Studies show that EI among healthcare leaders correlates with better patient outcomes, reduced staff burnout, and improved team dynamics.

Startups and Tech Firms

In fast-paced startups, emotionally intelligent founders are better equipped to handle uncertainty, pivot strategies, and maintain team morale. Their ability to manage stress and connect with diverse stakeholders is a competitive advantage.

Developing Emotional Intelligence as a Leader

EI is not fixed—it can be cultivated through intentional practice, and there are various strategies that leaders who seek to enhance their level of EI can develop. These include, but are not limited to:

1. Self-Reflection

Regularly assess your emotional responses, triggers, and patterns. Journaling or mindfulness can help increase self-awareness.

2. Solicit Feedback

Invite honest feedback from peers and team members. Use it to identify blind spots and growth areas.

3. Cultivate Empathy

Engage in active listening. Try to understand others' perspectives without judgment. Empathy deepens relationships and improves collaboration.

4. Manage Stress

Develop coping mechanisms for stress, such as breathing exercises, physical activity, or time management. Self-regulation is key to maintaining composure.

5. Invest in Coaching and Training

Leadership development programs often include EI training. Coaching can provide personalized guidance and accountability.



Emotional Intelligence vs. IQ: A False Dichotomy

While IQ measures cognitive abilities, EI assesses emotional and social competencies. Both are important — but in leadership, EI often plays a more decisive role.

Consider this: a brilliant strategist may falter if they cannot connect with their team. Conversely, a moderately intelligent leader, but one with high EI, can galvanize others, resolve conflicts, and drive results. Research supports this. According to *Talent Smart*, emotional intelligence accounts for 58% of performance in all types of jobs, and 90% of top performers have high EI.

Perceived Challenges and Criticisms about EI

Despite its benefits, emotional intelligence is not a panacea. Critics argue that:

- **EI can be manipulated:** Some individuals may use emotional awareness to deceive or manipulate.
- **Measurement is difficult:** Unlike IQ, EI lacks standardized, objective metrics.
- **Overemphasis may neglect other skills:** Focusing solely on EI may overlook technical or strategic competencies.

These concerns highlight the need for balanced leadership development-integrating EI with other essential skills.

Conclusion: The Future of Leadership: Emotionally Intelligent by Design

As workplaces become more diverse, global, and emotionally complex, the demand for emotionally intelligent leadership will only grow. Future leaders must be equipped to navigate cultural nuances, lead remote and hybrid teams, address mental health and well-being, and foster inclusive environments, among other management areas. Managers who prioritize EI in leadership development will be better positioned to thrive in this evolving work landscape.

Emotional intelligence is not just a “nice-to-have” management characteristic; it’s a leadership imperative. From building trust and resolving conflict to inspiring teams and shaping culture, EI empowers leaders to lead with authenticity, empathy, and impact.

In a world where change is constant and human connection is paramount, emotionally intelligent leadership is the compass that guides organizations toward resilience, innovation, and success.

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