

Emotional Intelligence

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Since its inception in the 1960's, there has been a continued discussion as to whether emotional intelligence (EI) is a set of traits intrinsic to individual personality or an application that is more focused on how EI insights are used by individuals to be effective actors. There is also a mixed model that doesn't look for purity of one or the other but draws on both to produce a framework for assessing and improving human social interactions. Emotional intelligence is the awareness of your own emotional state in general and in a specific moment, and its connection to the emotional state of another individual or group. This ability is essential to building strong relationships in personal life and leadership.

For our leadership considerations there are four essential dimensions of EI that can be used for improving leadership effectiveness: 1) self-awareness; 2) other awareness; 3) situational awareness; and 4) self-management. These have a linear quality about them, but real emotional intelligence is fluid and allows space to create a capacity for continuous interaction and growth.

Self-Awareness

The first dimension of emotional intelligence is self-awareness. With a rich set of meanings and traditions in philosophy and psychology, it is no surprise that self-awareness and EI are strongly connected. For our purposes here, self-awareness is the quality of being conscious of yourself as an actor in a social situation.

In leadership situations, specific dimensions of this awareness are particularly important. The first is a sense of your leadership style. Are you inclusive or more of an independent leader? Do you see and value the "big picture" or are you more focused on the details and implications of small actions? Are you more reflective and thoughtful or more expressive and engaging? You may be effective as a leader on any side of these pairings, but it is likely that one will feel more natural to you.

Beyond style, leaders also possess a set of strengths and weaknesses relevant to their leadership responsibilities. Are you a strong communicator? Are these strengths of communication equally strong in both one-on-one conversations and in large group presentations? Do you have deep technical knowledge related to your leadership role? Do you have the benefit of outside perspectives or have you mastered a particular set of analytic tools? Are you a good judge of people? How effective are you at developing and motivating others? What happens to your emotions when there is a great deal of conflict? Many of these qualities may fit into your leadership style or at least inform it, and they are more independent and objective than the aggregate sense of style.

A by-product of your style, strengths, and weaknesses is how you are perceived by others. How do others see you in your role as a leader? In one type of organization, a person who has a humble demeanor and more of a "servant" leader style might be highly valued and trusted. In another, perhaps more competitive setting, this same person

Leadership Tips

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might be seen as weak and ineffective. Knowing what others think is important for a truly emotionally intelligent actor.

Your self-awareness is also boosted by your understanding of what you like and shun in a work setting. These preferences may shape where you spend time and energy, and may be stumbling blocks that blur the focus on what is most important for the success of your leadership. For instance, you might avoid matters of personal conflict and fail to raise an issue that needs to come to someone's attention. Or you may overspend effort working with outside constituents because you are good at it and fail to invest adequately in developing internal resources.

All leaders have aspirations and ambitions and the more insight you have into yours, the higher your level of EI. Aspiration is the desire to achieve a high or laudable goal. Ambition is the desire for status, rank, and power. Both are often found in leaders, but they are different qualities. Understanding this difference and which of the two is more important will help enrich your self-awareness.

To have self-awareness it is also important to have a good sense of where your values lie and how and when you trade them against each other. Values can be situational, but the exercise of listing what is important and then discussing it with someone who knows you well can be revealing.

We all have fears, which can have a large influence on leadership capacity. Sometimes these fears are from the distant past, but they may also arise from the immediate context of your work. These fears drive your leadership behavior in ways that are both positive and negative. The challenge of the self-aware leader is to surface these fears if they are hidden, understand them and where they come from, look honestly at how they impact work, and gain some measure of control over them to enhance their positive contributions while minimizing or eliminating the negative impact they may be having on your work or organization.

Finally, a self-aware leader will understand the ebb and flow of their immediate emotional state, such as, "I'm a little down today because of some changes in my personal life" or, "I'm counting on that emotional burst of energy that will come from finishing this project", being able to both use and control them as needed for leadership effectiveness. Additionally, there is the awareness of deeper psychological states, such as a deep-seated inability to trust others or an exuberance for new things that may go well beyond what is warranted. Knowing these elements of our self and either changing them or accommodating them makes a leader more effective.

The basis of wisdom from ancient Greece onwards has been to know one's self. It is a daunting challenge, but it is also the basis of emotionally intelligent leadership wisdom.

Other Awareness

*"When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."*¹ — Ernest Hemingway's advice to a young writer.

Our quest to be emotionally intelligent now shifts from ourselves to the other: a person, a group, a profession, or an organization. How do we move beyond our perceptions of self with all of its heuristics that lead to bias and enter a mode of welcoming the stranger? There is a growing body of evidence that our biology disposes us to connect to others and to be understood and return this favor.² The beginning of this is through other-awareness. This involves as much work, if not more, than being self-aware.

Many of the same qualities that we want to know about ourselves we will need to understand in the other person as well to have true emotional intelligence. You will need to be curious about their style as a leader, their strengths and weaknesses, how others see them, their ambition and dreams, their values and fears. Learning about the qualities that others have, not to be judgmental, but to contrast and understand, gives us insight in how better to relate to them.

We all have an ego, and it is why starting with self-awareness is so important. When you meet another person, especially in a work or leadership setting, you will encounter their ego alongside other personality traits. Egocentricity is a measure of how much a person is focused on themselves and their desires, and how open they are to understanding others. Without openness a shared agenda may not be possible and your strategy for working with them will need to change.

Beyond their ego and its hold on them, we also want to make an assessment of what educators call the “it” factor. Just how savvy, adaptive, aware, and attuned are they? Do they seem to get the little jokes at the start of the conversation? Can they move the conversation to the next topic or next level?

You also want to discover and build whatever common ground there is between you. It might be mutual friends, a common experience, graduate school or a particular workplace, or maybe you are from the same part of the country. It does not have to be a lot but looking for shared experiences will build shared identity that can carry over to the work you need to share. From the outset of the encounter they will be sending all sorts of non-verbal messages and you will want to be attuned to what is coming your way. Do they seem comfortable or is there some anxiety about them? Is there an openness when they are listening or do they exhibit caution? These messages can be conveyed in facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, voice modulation, dress, and artifacts, such as office décor.

Additionally, the meaning of language is rarely just the words we speak, and to be fully aware of the other you will want to listen carefully and unpack their words for deeper messages. A good set of active listening skills is essential here, but the first rule is to remember that listening does not mean waiting to talk. Projecting understanding of what they are saying in your thoughts, asking questions to clarify, asking for examples and acknowledging when you see something differently, but in a manner that accepts their truth, are all ways to be more actively engaged and to take away a deeper awareness of the person.

While knowing self-awareness is important, knowing the other is essential. Without the substance of the other we run the risk in becoming lost in our own egocentric world which has limited horizons and is destined to never arrive at a valuable social intelligence.

Situational Awareness

Humans have evolved to assess social situations for safety or danger. But these qualities developed in a slower, more familiar tribal setting; it can be challenging to make these assessments in the modern world where life moves faster and is more complex. Recognizing what is needed in the moment is essential to being emotionally intelligent.

The first is an awareness of what is going on in front of us in real time. This starts with both self and other awareness, but expands to include the setting, cultural context, history of interactions, other impeding events, and your understanding of the agenda, formal or informal, for the engagement. There is a pattern that you come to expect in each engagement. Even with a new encounter, when your experience varies from expectation, it becomes an important part of your awareness and informs the next phase of the process.

As your perceptions are shaping your awareness, they are also leading you to judgments about what is happening. These assessments lead to understanding of the situation. For instance, you may have projected that informing a client or team member of a new opportunity would be met with enthusiasm and excitement; instead you perceive that the news is causing anxiety or even hostility and withdrawal. You now understand the situation differently and can project it into the future with some predictive qualities. In the situation above you might conclude that you could force the issue, but without their active buy-in and engagement you may risk damage to the relationship and now have the option to choose a different path.

A convenient tool for making these assessments is the [quick six of considerations](#):

1. Power — What is it? Who has it, both formal and informal?

2. Relationship — Is it good or bad, important or not, short or long term, good as it is or needs to be better?
3. Quality — Is there a technically correct answer or a clearly better path that is understood and shared?
4. Importance — Where does this fall in the priorities of the organization's mission? Is it critical or just nice to have? What is the importance of this to me (also spelled ego)?
5. Time — Can we work some more on this or does it need to move now?
6. Buy-in — How much engagement do I need or can I go it alone?

Of course, these six interact constantly in the assessment of a situation, making them more complex. There are always other matters at play, too, but the quick six is a good foundation to begin an assessment of a situation or to frame beforehand if the opportunity allows.

The hard wiring to respond to our environment resides deeply in our emotional domain, while the choice of a better path lies more in our reasoning capacity; for this, it is important to recognize both and determine the impact on us by balancing reason and emotion. Recognizing a threatening move by another person is an important part of assessment. Understanding how we might best respond to achieve our desired outcome allows us to make sense of what is happening and, more importantly, what it means, which now informs our emotional intelligence on how we should act.

Self-Management

The three preceding elements of emotional intelligence are matters that mostly go on in our head. But as Wordsworth reminds us in Tintern Abbey that the best portions of any good life are the “little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love.” It is the actions that we take that will be the ways in which emotional intelligence marks us with others.

A first step toward ‘right action’ is knowing and accepting the self of which we are now more aware. This does not mean that you should not be working to improve yourself in constructive ways, but instead looking at yourself in the bigger picture. Looking at our upside and downside will allow for a more authentic approach with others and a more human understanding and acceptance of their strengths and weaknesses.

In this regard it is also useful to be open about yourself with others. This should be done carefully; no one wants to know everything about us, but building a capacity to be more transparent enlists others in our quest of self-management, makes us feel more genuine, and creates a context for greater accountability.

To regulate yourself will be important to have a good sense of short- and long-term aims and a capacity to balance the two. In this regard it will always be useful to have an appreciation of how your impulse control mechanism and temper work. While our own self-awareness may give us these insights, looking for others to share an outside perspective may help in seeing them more clearly.

While it may seem like the balance of short- and long-terms aims is a given, it can be useful to have a picture of what success looks like when deciding what 'right actions' to take. This exercise gives us a chance to have an aspirational goal, examine it from how we think others will see it, and also give some insight into the trade-offs that we or others might need to consider going forward. This can also be a good question to build common ground and trust among team members.

Controlling your impulses and temper will be greatly aided by adding two qualities to your leadership skills. The first is a mindfulness practice. This should be something that speaks to you and can become a regular part of your day — it needs to be something that you dedicate time to. Some leaders find a meditation regimen works to raise mindfulness. Others find yoga or regular exercise work well. Sometimes just taking breaks to get outside, reserving time for reflection daily, or even breathing slowly into the moment can work. The path should be yours, but it is an essential part of self-management.

The second quality is developing an attitude of curiosity rather than judgment. Curiosity allows us to continue learning and keeps our minds open to new possibilities. This is greatly aided by the type of listening discussed above but carries it a step further and is more engaged than even active listening. As a leader you do not surrender any of your responsibilities or even power, but they are channeled in a way that actively engages the other person or group in a consideration of a collective success. Hard decisions and steps are still taken, but there is more engagement in this approach than emotional reactions or telling others about their reality.³

Two tactical considerations when managing yourself are knowing your body and being able to walk away gracefully. Emotional intelligence involves the right balance of the mind and heart. When they are in conflict, we have a visceral reaction that locates somewhere in our body, a stomachache, flushing neck, throbbing temple, tightening jaw, or scrunching shoulders. Whatever yours is, you should be aware of it and also recognize that this symbol might go off before you realize what is going on. When this happens, you need to be prepared and ready to walk away until things can return to the right balance. A practiced statement with these core elements (but in your words) is good to have at hand: “This seems really important to both of us. I feel myself getting a little triggered emotionally here and I know that is not good. Can I ask that we take a break and get back to this soon?” Then schedule the time right then.

Finally, self-management is greatly aided if the rest of your life is in good proportion. Is your work-life balance something that supports you and your family? Do you get regular exercise? Have a healthy diet? Do you do other things than work, like hobbies, sports, and travel? Without efforts along these lines, and some success, it will be hard to be as fully emotionally intelligent as you want to be.

“To accept one’s past — one’s history — is not the same thing as drowning in it: it is learning how to use it.” — James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com; contact Ed O’Neil at herringoneil@gmail.com.

About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. In addition, CHCS *Medicaid Academies* provide policy and leadership training for senior Medicaid staff as well as colleagues across partnering state and county agencies. Ed O’Neil has advised numerous MLI Fellows and Medicaid senior managers over the past decade. To learn more, visit www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders.

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ENDNOTES

¹ M. Cowley, "Mister Papa", LIFE magazine January 10, 1949, Volume 26, No. 2, p. 90.

² M. Liberman. *Social* Crown Publishers: New York, 2013.

³ E. Schein. *Humble Inquiry*. Berrett-Kohler: Oakland, CA, 2013.