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Hiring

Hiring for Emotional Intelligence

by Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay

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Making a hire can be a hit-or-miss affair. A promising candidate can turn out to be a disaster, leaving frustrated colleagues and tattered client relationships in his wake. Sooner than anyone planned, the new hire and the organization part ways, with recrimination and regret on both sides.

To increase their chances of making good hiring decisions, many companies subject candidates to an extended battery of interviews. But according to Adele B. Lynn, author of *The EQ Interview: Finding Employees with High Emotional Intelligence* (Amacom, 2008), conducting more interviews is not really the answer. What's needed are better interviews–interviews that take a measure of candidates' emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence–EQ, for short–"accounts for anywhere from 24% to 69% of performance success," says Lynn. Some positions require more emotional intelligence than others, but there are very

few jobs in which a solid level of EQ does not confer advantage. For managers it is crucial, as it is for anyone who needs to be adept at the give-and-take of working as part of a creative, dynamic team.

“After all, what does it matter if a software engineer is ferociously hardworking if he alienates his peers?” says Lynn, also founder of the Adele Lynn Leadership Group (Belle Vernon, Pa.). “What’s the benefit of deep marketing expertise if a manager can’t recognize how her behavior demoralizes her direct reports and drives half of them to look for other jobs?”

There are multiple aspects to emotional intelligence, but homing in on these three in the interview process will go a long way toward identifying candidates with high EQ—and eliminating those likely to destroy more value than they create:

1. **Self-awareness and self-regulation.** The candidate understands the needs and wishes that drive him and how they affect his behavior. He regulates his emotions so that any fear, anger, or anxiety he experiences doesn’t spread to his colleagues or make him lose control.
2. **Reading others and recognizing the impact of his behavior on them.** The candidate has well-developed emotional and social “radar” and can sense how his words and actions influence his colleagues.
3. **The ability to learn from mistakes.** He can acknowledge his mistakes, reflect critically upon them, and learn from them.

What follows are guidelines for questions to ask and answers to listen for in interviews. The advice here is also pertinent to managers who need to interview colleagues outside their units to decide whether to appoint them to cross-functional teams.

1. Self-awareness and self-regulation

Anyone working in an organization needs to recognize his moods, his emotions, and the deeper emotional needs that drive him—and how they shape his behavior. Generally people are competent at labeling

their moods ("I'm in a good/bad/restless/mellow mood") and emotions ("I'm happy/sad/angry/anxious"), but fewer can articulate the strong emotional desires that shape much of their behavior and identity, such as a longing for validation, a hunger for power and status, a strong need to be liked.

This is the case for Ian, a manager in a midsize specialty consumer products company. Ian places a high premium on always being right but is unaware of this need and how it makes him arrogant, defensive, and cautious in turn. When a project falters or a client is unhappy, Ian is unable to work with his direct reports, his boss, and his coworkers to reach a common understanding of the problem. Instead, he focuses on demonstrating his blamelessness for it—not very helpful when what's needed is a solution.

In addition to understanding her emotions, an emotionally intelligent person is able to regulate them and control her behavior. When anxious or fearful, she is self-aware enough to recognize that she tends to broadcast these emotions nonverbally, allowing her to put extra effort into projecting calm optimism. When angry, she has the self-control not to rage at her colleagues or direct reports.

To assess a candidate's self-awareness and ability to self-regulate, ask these questions, which, like the other questions in this article, are adapted from Lynn's book *The EQ Interview*:

- Can you tell me about a time when your mood affected your performance, either negatively or positively?
- Tell me about a conflict you had with a peer, direct report, or boss—how did it start and how did it get resolved?
- A manager has to maintain a productive, positive tone even when she's anxious about a business threat. How have you been able to do this in previous positions?

2. Reading others and recognizing the impact of his behavior on them

Because so much of a manager's work is accomplished with and through others, the ability to read other people—to pick up their emotions and discern their opinions—can spell the difference between success and failure. Managers also need to recognize how their behavior influences that of others. High-EQ individuals are deft persuaders and motivators because they can read others' cues and adjust their own words and behaviors accordingly.

To assess a candidate's skill level in this aspect of emotional intelligence, ask questions such as:

- Tell me about a time when you did or said something that had a negative impact on a customer, peer, or direct report. How did you know the impact was negative?
- Have you ever been in a business situation where you thought you needed to adjust your behavior? How did you know and what did you do?

In one interview Lynn participated in, "the candidate gave a few examples of when he had a negative impact on someone, but in each case, he said someone called him aside and told him where he fell short—he didn't seem able to recognize these things on his own." In contrast, says Lynn, "another candidate for the same position pointed to very specific examples of when he was able to read another's body language and behavior that indicated that something was wrong." The second candidate landed the job. "No doubt that built-in radar system will help him read other people and situations, too," says Lynn.

Misreading a customer can be fatal to the relationship, Lynn points out. A financial services account manager directed a customer he took to be of modest means to a less expensive product than the one the man had been considering. Feeling insulted and humiliated, the client took his business elsewhere.

3. Theability to learn from mistakes

Missteps and outright failure offer opportunities for growth, and high-EQ individuals are able to learn from them. Here again, look for

positive patterns in candidates' past experiences:

- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you needed to modify or change your behavior? How did you know? How have you been able to take lessons learned from that situation and apply them to another?
- Tell me about a situation when you discovered that you were on the wrong course. How did you know? What did you do? What, if anything, did you learn from the experience?

Lynn was part of an interview team for an IT position. When the candidate was asked to describe her work on a project that faltered, she spoke of a systems overhaul that missed key deadlines and required several course corrections. Asked to analyze how she could have made it run more smoothly, the candidate answered that she should have documented expectations at the outset of the project and communicated more precisely and consistently with users. She also cited her tendency to be reserved and acknowledged that in the past she sometimes held back from asking necessary questions. This candidate concluded by saying that she had thought a lot about what went right and wrong in the project and how she could be more effective the next time she was called on to contribute to such a project.

Contrast the self-awareness and openness to learning in her answer with the defensiveness and rigidity in another candidate's response. When asked about conflicts she had experienced, she ticked off several diverse examples: a schedule delay, a customer dispute, a delayed product launch. Asked to reflect on how they started and what part she played in them, she portrayed herself as a victim of incompetent colleagues, unreasonable customers, and unlucky circumstances. Several times in her narration she said, "I knew I was right—the others just refused to see it."

Her ability to learn and progress was about zero—an ominous sign for her future performance.

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