

How to Improve Your Emotional Intelligence

An overview of the importance of Emotional Intelligence for your own success and the success of your organization.

8/26/2019 | COMMUNICATION | 12 MINUTE READ



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Today's in-demand skills are increasingly technical in nature. However, there's a corresponding need for the uniquely human ability to work with and through others to accomplish important goals.

Enter emotional intelligence (EI), a set of skills that help us recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions as well as recognize, understand and influence the emotions of others.

We recently spoke with [Margaret Andrews](#), instructor of [Emotional Intelligence in Leadership](#), about how people can build EI for better interpersonal relations. Andrews is the former associate dean at Harvard University's Division of Continuing Education and executive director at the MIT Sloan School of Management.

"Emotional intelligence is critical in building and maintaining relationships and influencing others—key skills that help people throughout their career and wherever they sit in an organizational structure," says Andrews.

Additionally, research suggests that people with a high emotional quotient (EQ) are [more innovative](#) and have [higher job satisfaction](#) than those with lower EQs.

Let's dive into what exactly EI entails, and how you can improve on this essential component of successful relationships.

What Are the Components of Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence is a set of skills and behaviours. While some people will be naturally more adept at certain aspects, EI can be learned, developed, and enhanced.

The four main components of EI are self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and social skills:

SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is the ability to identify and understand your own emotions and the impact we have on others. It's the cornerstone of emotional intelligence and the other components of EI depend on this self-awareness.

"It all starts with self-awareness, which is foundation of EI, and it builds from there. If you're aware of your own emotions and the behaviours they trigger, you can begin to manage these emotions and behaviours," says Andrews.

Our emotions impact our mood, behaviours, performance, and interactions with other people. "We are all having emotions all the time," says Andrews, "the question is whether you are aware of these emotions and the impact they have on your behaviour – and other people."

According to Tasha Eurich, an organizational psychologist, researcher, and author of [Insight](#), people who are self-aware tend to be more confident and more creative. They also make better decisions, build stronger relationships, and communicate more effectively.

SELF-REGULATION

Self-awareness opens the door to self-regulation, which is the ability to manage these emotions and behaviours. Once we're aware of our emotions, we can begin to manage them and keep the disruptive emotions and impulses under control.

"People with strong self-regulation can pause and take a deep breath in tense and stressful situations, explains Andrews, "which helps them remain calm and think before they speak or act."

These people tend toward a positive outlook and are adaptable to a variety of situations and circumstances. "On the flip side," she says, "those that cannot contain their negative emotions and impulses often set off a chain reaction of negative emotions in others."

“There’s an old adage that people join organizations and leave managers,” says Andrews, “and it’s true. So, companies – or managers – that have high turnover rates should take a look in the mirror.”

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Social awareness is our ability to understand the emotions of others and a key component of this is empathy.

Jamil Zaki, a Stanford professor and author of [The War for Kindness](#), describes empathy as having three components – identifying what others feel, sharing this emotion, and wishing to improve their experience.

“It’s not about how you would feel in their situation, but rather, how they actually feel,” says Andrews.

People with strong social awareness tend toward kindness. However, this doesn’t mean they cannot give others difficult feedback – in fact, they may be better at delivering this ‘tough love’ because they understand the other person and want to help them improve.

SOCIAL SKILLS

“Social skills are what separate a great manager from a good one,” says Andrews.

These skills, which include influence, conflict management, teamwork, and the ability to inspire others, make it possible to build and maintain healthy relationships in all parts of your life.

People with strong social skills can make an enormous difference on a team and in organizations because they understand others and act on this knowledge to move people toward a common goal.

To improve your emotional intelligence, you need to start at the beginning, with self-awareness. However, gauging your self-awareness is innately difficult because, as Andrews puts it, “you don’t know what you don’t know.”

Research Reveals Barriers to Self-Awareness

Without an objective sense of who you are and what drives you, it’s nearly impossible to be emotionally intelligent. Andrews cites a study by Tasha Eurich which found that 95 percent of participants gave themselves high marks in self-awareness.

However, using more empirical measures of self-awareness, the study found that only 10-15 percent of the cohort was truly self-aware.

That's a pretty big gap, and one that suggests most of us aren't very self-aware. What's worse, research also shows that managers and CEOs may be the least self-aware of all. This is not despite their authority, but quite possibly because of it.

Eurich wrote in the [Harvard Business Review](#) that the more power someone obtains, the more likely they are to be overconfident about how well they know themselves. After all, those at the top of the chain have fewer people giving them feedback.

Often, when managers do receive feedback from employees, it isn't as honest as it might be because subordinates are afraid of incurring negative consequences. Managers are insulated from criticism, and as a result, self-awareness sinks.

Receiving honest, constructive feedback is key to becoming self-aware. Andrews notes that a 360-degree emotional intelligence assessment can be a very effective way to gain insight into your EI-components and the impact you have on others.

"Many people shrug off differences in how they rate themselves versus how others rate them on EI competencies by saying that they're too hard on themselves or that others don't really understand their intent," says Andrews, "but really it shows a lack of self-awareness."

What Are the Signs of Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence is a set of skills and behaviours that can be learned and developed. Here are some tell-tale signs of people with low EQ and those with high EQ.

People with low EQ:

- Often feels misunderstood
- Get upset easily
- Become overwhelmed by emotions
- Have problems being assertive

People with high EQ:

- Understand the links between their emotions and how they behave
- Remain calm and composed during stressful situations
- Are able to influence others toward a common goal
- Handle difficult people with tact and diplomacy

Three Steps Toward Improved Emotional Intelligence

Developing emotional intelligence is an ongoing process. The journey differs from person to person. Nonetheless, according to Andrews, the following actions may lead you to better self-awareness, empathy, and social skills.

1. RECOGNIZE YOUR EMOTIONS AND NAME THEM

What emotions are you feeling right now? Can you name them? When in a stressful situation, what emotions typically arise? How would you like to respond in these situations? Can you stop to pause and reconsider your response? Taking a moment to name your feelings and temper your reactivity is an integral step toward EI.

2. ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Audit your self-perception by asking managers, colleagues, friends, or family how they would rate your emotional intelligence. For example, ask them about how you respond to difficult situations, how adaptable or empathetic you are, and/or how well you handle conflict. It may not always be what you want to hear, but it will often be what you need to hear.

3. READ LITERATURE

Studies show that reading literature with complex characters can improve empathy. Reading stories from other people's perspectives helps us gain insight into their thoughts, motivations, and actions and may help enhance your social awareness.

How to Establish a Culture of Emotional Intelligence

Building E.I. in yourself is one thing, but influencing others to adopt a more empathetic mind-set can be a challenge. To create a culture of high EQ, managers and supervisors must model emotionally intelligent behaviour.

"If you want to change how your organization does in EI, you can set norms for how people communicate and how they disagree," says Andrews.

In addition, you need to recognize and celebrate those that exhibit emotional intelligence.;

"Start making heroes of people who help other people," says Andrews. "It's not just the person who got to the top of the mountain first - it's all the people who helped them. If you want to encourage good team behaviour, recognize it, and call it out for what it is."



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