Emotional Intelligence Is No Soft Skill

High emotional intelligence is a strong predictor of success. What's your EQ?

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Despite a bevy of research and best-selling books on the topic, many managers still downplay emotional intelligence as a “touchy-feely” soft skill. The importance of characteristics like empathy and self-awareness is understood, sure. But intelligence and technical capability are seen as the real drivers of professional success. After all, a bit of coaching can help you navigate difficult conversations. And isn’t interpersonal friction simply part of organizational life?

But evidence suggests quite the opposite: that high emotional intelligence (EI) is a stronger predictor of success. In fact, high EI bolsters the hard skills, helping us think more creatively about how best to leverage our technical chops.

A Key Differentiator for Your Personal Brand

When I co-teach the program Strategic Leadership, I ask participants to list the characteristics of a great mentor or role model and to classify each characteristic into one of three groups: IQ/smarts, technical skills, or emotional intelligence. Almost invariably, the majority of characteristics fall into the EI bucket.

In fact, emotional intelligence—the ability to, say, understand your effect on others and manage yourself accordingly—accounts for nearly 90 percent of what moves people up the ladder when IQ and technical skills are roughly similar.

Although many participants are surprised by the results, scientific research has proved the point. Daniel Goleman is the author and psychologist who put emotional intelligence on the business map. He found that, beyond a certain point, there is little or no correlation between IQ and high levels of professional success.

One needs above-average intelligence—which Goleman defines as one standard deviation from the norm or an IQ of about 115—to master the technical knowledge needed to be a doctor, lawyer, or business executive. But once people enter the workforce, IQ and technical skills are often equal among those on the rise. Emotional intelligence becomes an important differentiator (hear Goleman discuss his findings in this video on YouTube).

In fact, emotional intelligence—the ability to, for instance, understand your effect on others and manage yourself accordingly—accounts for nearly 90 percent of what moves people up the ladder when IQ and technical skills are roughly similar (see "What Makes a Leader" in the *Harvard Business Review*, January 2004).

Research has also demonstrated that emotional intelligence has a strong impact on organizational performance. Sanofi, the French pharmaceutical company, focused on the emotional intelligence skills of its sales force, which boosted annual performance by 12 percent (see the research by S. Jennings and B.R. Palmer in “Sales Performance Through Emotional Intelligence Development,” *Organizations and People*, 2007). After Motorola provided EI training for staff in a manufacturing plant, the productivity of more than 90 percent of those trained went up (Bruce Cryer, Rollin McCraty, and Doc Childre: “Pull the Plug on Stress,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 2003).

Emotional intelligence increases corporate performance for a number of reasons. But perhaps the most important is the ability of managers and leaders to inspire discretionary effort—the extent to which employees and team members go above and beyond the call of duty.

The core of high EI is self-awareness: if you don't understand your own motivations and behaviors, it's nearly impossible to develop an understanding of others. A lack of self-awareness can also thwart your ability to think rationally and apply technical capabilities.

Individuals are much more inclined to go the extra mile when asked by an empathetic person they respect and admire. Although discretionary effort isn’t endless, managers with low emotional intelligence will have much less to draw on. If an organization has a cadre of emotionally intelligent leaders, such discretionary efforts multiply.

THE BEDROCK OF EI: SELF-AWARENESS

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Two parts of the brain are constantly fighting for control. The neocortex is the cognitive centre, where our IQ and working memory reside. On average, in a normal emotional state, the neocortex can process a factorial of four variables, which is 24 possible interrelationships.

Adeptly handling multiple variables is central to performing important tasks such as developing a strategy, improving a complicated process, setting priorities, understanding consequences, and gleaning keen insights from data and information.

The amygdala is the feeling side of the brain, our emotional centre. As the part of our brain concerned with our survival, it responds 100 times faster than the neocortex. Such responsiveness is particularly useful when confronted with a potentially threatening situation.

But because it can be triggered by both real and perceived threats, we can fall into the trap of imagining the worst before we have all the facts. How many of us, when faced with a rumour of layoffs, are quick to envision the worst-case scenario before we learn the truth?

WHEN EMOTIONS HIJACK OUR ABILITY TO REASON

When the feeling side or our brain is triggered, it hijacks our cognitive system. With the slightest provocation, our ability to apply reason and logic can drop by 75 percent. Thus, instead of handling 24 interrelationships, we may suddenly be able to cope with only two. We may start to see only in black and white, in binary frameworks like yes or no, right or wrong, and win or lose.

Using questions instead of statements can also help managers and leaders avoid triggering emotional hijacks in others. Our feeling mind wants to sense that we are included, autonomous, competent, valued, respected, and safe.

Throughout a work day, there are numerous emotional triggers: an e-mail from a superior saying “We need to talk,” a comment made by a colleague with a hidden agenda, even a funny look from someone important in the office.

It can take us nearly 20 minutes to recover from an emotional encounter. If the feelings are frequently retriggered, we can end up spending significant amounts of time with little ability to leverage our technical capability and inherent intelligence.

FOCUS ON UNDERSTANDING RATHER THAN JUDGMENT

So how can we speed up our recovery? It’s important to stop and turn our attention from the emotional to the physical. Physical activity such as taking a walk or going for a drink of water reduces the amount of adrenaline and cortisol flowing through the body.

Once the body is calmed physically, we need to seek information and determine if the threat is real and, if so, what we can do to address it. Ask yourself whether an issue will matter in six minutes, six days, six weeks, six months, or six years. Questions engage your curiosity—your neocortex. Statements, however, imply judgment, triggering the feeling side of the brain.

If someone is habitually late to meetings, for example, asking yourself why that is the case will lead to a more productive conversation about the issue than stewing on the statement: “I can’t stand the fact that he is always late.”

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Using questions instead of statements can also help managers avoid triggering emotional hijacks in others. Our feeling mind wants to sense that we are included, autonomous, competent, valued, respected, and safe. Something as simple as asking, “Can you tell me more about how you came to that conclusion?” or “What information would be helpful for

you?" is far less likely to trigger an emotional hijack than statements such as, "I don't completely agree" or "I'm worried about what is happening."

It is easy to consign emotional intelligence to the periphery of work life and concentrate on smarts and know-how. But such a focus will likely hamper success. It can leave us without the most important differentiator for our personal brands. And an inability to manage ourselves severely constrains our capacity to use hard skills such as the technical competence that we have worked so hard to master.

By the same token, a command of emotional intelligence is a proven differentiator in the competitive climb up the corporate ladder. By inspiring others, emotionally intelligent leaders can ignite discretionary effort on the part of their teams to boost productivity and spur higher levels of employee engagement that comes from a strong company morale.

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