

Emotional Intelligence: One of the Keys to a Healthy Company Culture

Tom Cline

It isn't necessarily the smartest people who are the most successful or feel most fulfilled in life. You may know someone who is academically smart yet is socially inept and unsuccessful at work or in their personal relationships. Many believe that focusing on and learning to raise your Emotional Intelligence (EQ) can help you more effectively deal with the stresses and emotions in your life, thereby helping to increase your success and fulfillment.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict. It can help you build stronger relationships, succeed at school and work, and achieve your career and personal goals by enabling you to connect with your feelings, turn intentions into actions, and make informed decisions about what matters most to you.

Much has been written about the growing importance of emotional intelligence in the workplace, the majority focused on management and leadership positions. The *Harvard Business Review* reported that EQ represents about 90% of the difference between average and star performers at the top tier of executives within an organization.

The Future of Jobs report for 2020, published by the World Economic Forum, shows emotional intelligence (EQ) as number 6 of the 10 most important skills in the workforce. EQ wasn't even on the list in 2015.

My goal is to look at emotional intelligence as it applies to the non-management positions in your organization. As teamwork and collaboration are becoming more important to how organizations produce work, make decisions, and improve processes, the ability of all employees to understand EQ concepts and appropriately adapt their behaviors can be critical to a healthy culture and the attraction and retention of top talent.

Let's begin by reviewing a brief background on the four characteristics that most experts agree are at the core of emotional intelligence.

1. **Self-awareness – Thoroughly understanding yourself and your effect on others.** Those who are self-aware know their abilities, play to their strengths, and welcome feedback. They typically have a self-deprecating sense of humor; they admit to failure and do it with a smile.
2. **Self-regulation – Controlling destructive impulses and thinking before acting.** This involves fairness and trust when interacting with others and focusing on addressing the reasons for failure instead of placing blame.

Experts describe these first two traits as our "personal competence." It represents our ability to stay aware of our emotions and manage our behavior and tendencies.

The remaining traits are those that make up our "social competence" – our ability to understand other people's moods, behaviors, and motives in order to improve the quality of our relationships. They are:

3. **Social awareness – The ability to accurately pick up on emotions in other people and understand what’s really going on.**
4. **Relationship management – The ability to use your awareness of your own emotions and those of others to successfully manage interactions.**

As you consider yourself and those in your organization, you’re undoubtedly thinking of people who are strong in some of these four areas but weaker in others. The good news is that, to some extent, these characteristics, or skills, can be learned. Improvement is possible when individuals recognize their areas of need and work to develop them. When beginning to do so, it is best to start with an EQ assessment that helps individuals understand their strengths, areas of weakness, and triggers.

Personal Competence

The most basic profiling tools are self-administered, where each individual ranks a series of statements on the extent to which they describe, or are like, the person. These groups of phrases or statements cover a variety of areas, from how outgoing or shy one is, to their level of organization and focus on detail, to their desire to be viewed positively by others. There is a risk that this type of profile provides a description of a person’s ideal self rather than an accurate picture of their current self, but they offer a good starting point for your work on EQ regardless.

In a typical assessment, like the one used by Kelli Baxter of Value Generation Partners, the results are based on the combined responses to all statements and present a profile that places each person into one of four categories. The profiler provides the individual with insights into various areas, such as:

- The virtue they most highly value (e.g., courage, strength, loyalty, responsibility).
- Their inclination with senses, with strategy, with people, and with reality.
- Their areas of strength and how best to get results (e.g., negotiator, troubleshooter, problem-solver).
- What it is about them or what they do that makes them most proud, such as being able to make an impact, being competent, having empathy, or being dependable.
- What causes them stress (e.g., restrictions, incompetence, disorganization, feeling artificial).
- What irritates them (e.g., being told how to do things, illogical people, being treated impersonally, a lack of rules).

Another example of an organization that offers materials and training for a self-study program is Neuralink. Their EQ assessment looks at 12 emotional intelligence competencies and creates an individual profile based on a person’s responses. The 12 competencies, ranging from emotional self-awareness to self-control, empathy, and interpersonal communication, are rated into one of five categories: negative impact, requires development, needs refinement, competent, and area of excellence.

Regardless of the assessment tool chosen, the output should provide insight into aspects of the individual’s character and behavior by providing answers to questions like the following.

- How aware are you of your strengths and limitations?
- To what level do you modify your behavior to suit changing situations?
- How do you react to pressure?
- Can you control your impulses when under stress?

- How sensitive are you to other people's emotions?
- Do you excel at developing relationships?
- How comfortable are you at expressing your emotions?
- How assertive are you?

These answers provide a starting point and are the basis for the self-awareness step. Once people begin to understand things about themselves, such as their strengths, weaknesses, irritations, and stress triggers, they can begin to focus on how their behavior affects others.

Consider a time when stress overwhelmed you. Was it easy to think clearly or make a rational decision? Probably not. When you become overly stressed, your ability to think clearly and to accurately assess emotions—your own and other people's—becomes compromised. Effectively engaging your emotional intelligence means being able to use your emotions to help you to make constructive decisions about your behavior. It is the ability to control emotions and impulses. People who self-regulate typically don't allow themselves to become too angry or jealous, and they don't make impulsive, careless decisions. They think before they act.

Characteristics of self-regulation include thoughtfulness, comfort with change, integrity, and the ability to say no. Employees with this perspective and skill are the ones you want on your team; the ones you want to work with. They aren't always looking for credit or attention for their accomplishments. They allow others to shine.

To evaluate your ability to self-regulate, begin by examining how you, or others with whom you work, react to stressful situations. Do you become upset every time there is a delay, a roadblock, or things just don't go the way you want? Do you blame others or become angry with them even when it's not their fault? These are signs of poor self-regulation. The boss or fellow employee who is constantly cursing and yelling at people doesn't have the frame of mind to appreciate the impact their emotions are having on their behavior. They haven't learned to recognize what triggers those emotions in the first place.

What are some ways that a person's self-regulation can be improved?

It is important to understand what triggers a person's emotional response. It begins with being able to connect with our emotions and recognize when we are feeling anger, sadness, fear, or joy and the accompanying physical sensations that may be felt in our stomach, throat, or chest. Think about the situations and conditions under which these occur. Making a list of the times when strong emotions are felt during the workday will provide valuable insight into the scenarios, topics, or conditions that are acting as triggers. This knowledge can help you to anticipate your emotional response and better manage your behavior.

A valuable asset in this facet of EQ is having a peer who is trained to recognize when triggers are having a negative effect on someone's behavior. They can assist by communicating the emotion they are seeing and helping to diffuse the source of stress.

Stress management is a key component in this aspect of emotional intelligence.

Stress is an automatic response from your nervous system, so some stressors arise at predictable times: your commute to work, a meeting with your boss, or family gatherings are examples. When handling such predictable stressors, you can either change the situation or change your reaction.

Adaptability is another characteristic that, when enhanced, can turn what may have previously triggered an emotional response into an opportunity to keep moving forward but in a different direction. Emotionally intelligent people are able to recognize and determine when to continue their course and when it's time for a change.

Similarly, when one strategy is not working, try evaluating and determining if something else will work. From the way you treat yourself to how you treat others to your daily routine, always stay open-minded and be willing to adapt and introduce new elements into how you think and what you do.

Effective self-regulation is the ability to control and redirect destructive impulses and moods. Rather than yelling at a co-worker who didn't complete a task or did something incorrectly, get yourself into the habit of thinking through and discussing the reasons for the mistake. Is more training needed? Was there clear communication of what was expected and by when?

Here are some other ways to improve your self-regulation skills in the workplace:

- **Find techniques to release workplace stress.** Having hobbies outside of work is a great place to start. Physical exercise is also a healthy way to release stress.
- **Keep your cool.** Accept the fact that you cannot control everything. Look for helpful ways you can respond to triggers that don't add fuel to the fire.
- **Think before making decisions.** Emotions can overwhelm you in the heat of the moment, but you can make a calmer, more rational choice if you give yourself a bit of time to consider all the possibilities.

With the ability to manage stress and stay emotionally present, you can make constructive decisions about your behavior, be more thoughtful, and better adapt to changing situations.

Social Competence

Social Awareness, which is defined by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves in *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* as the ability to “recognize and understand the moods of other individuals and entire groups of people. It's the ability to observe body language, facial expressions, and even posture in an effort to respond appropriately.” These nonverbal cues represent the major portion of how others are communicating with you. They let you know how others are really feeling, how their emotional state is changing from minute to minute, and what is truly important to them.

In a team setting, social awareness manifests as members helping others through stressful situations by recognizing nonverbal signs, understanding the triggers that we discussed above, asking questions, and being empathetic to help others who are dealing with issues.

Social awareness requires you to live in the moment, to practice active listening and observing, and to avoid the distractions that are always present around us. You can't pick up on subtle nonverbal cues when your mind is occupied with thinking about other things, or you are simply zoning out on your smartphone. While many of us pride ourselves on our ability to multitask, doing so means that you are apt to miss the subtle emotional shifts taking place in others that help you to fully understand them.

Paying attention to other people doesn't diminish your own self-awareness. By investing the time and effort to focus on others, you may gain insight into your own emotional state as well as your values and beliefs. If you are uncomfortable hearing others express certain views, for example, you may have learned something important about yourself.

Daniel Goleman, who is considered a leader in the field of emotional intelligence, believes that the social awareness segment contains three competencies that set the best performers apart from the average.

- **Empathy:** Sensing others' feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their concerns. This is about seeing things from another person's perspective. (Empathy differs from sympathy, which means feeling sorry for others and their predicament.)
- **Organizational Awareness:** Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships. It can be described as the ability to recognize both the social and political dynamics that occur on teams, in businesses, and even in communities. People with this skill can accurately read key power relationships and then make effective use of these relationships to achieve their desired results.
- **Service Orientation:** Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting the needs of customers, both internal and external. Employees with this skill understand customers' needs and effectively match them with products and services.

Let's examine some tools that can be used to improve your social awareness. Janet Sprimont, Senior Consultant at Inspireity, writes about the following tactics that can be used to help a person become more socially aware.

1. Understand what it means to listen

Most of us think we're good listeners. Unfortunately, the truth is that we're usually too busy thinking of our next response to really hear what others are saying. Good listeners don't assume they know or understand a situation before hearing someone out. They listen, look for the facts of the situation, and then analyze the emotions surrounding it.

2. Repeat what was said

The best way to ensure you understand what's been said is to repeat back what you heard in your own words and ask for more information, if appropriate. This helps to show that you understand what was said, and it conveys to the other person that their opinion is valued and heard.

Active listening, like this, ultimately leads to greater understanding and trust among leaders and employees.

3. Pay attention to tone of voice

Ask any actor and they'll tell you – the *way* you say something can be the difference between night and day. For example, if a team member enthusiastically shrills with excitement while saying, "No problem!" that is quite a bit different than an ambivalent mumbling of the same words.

Notice the energy behind what your fellow employees say to get a sense of how they're feeling. This is especially critical during virtual meetings when you do not have visual cues. A person's tone of voice can help you get a read on how they're feeling and give you a better opportunity to choose the most appropriate response or course of action.

4. Watch facial expressions and body language

Stay aware of nonverbal cues. You must be present and giving your full attention to notice things like facial expressions and body language. While this will require extra effort, it can go a long way.

For instance, if you ask Adam if he has time to discuss something, and he winces while saying, “Sure, we can talk” – take notice of his body language. While he is saying yes, his physical reaction is telling you that it’s not a good time.

5. Keep a finger on the pulse of the organization

Can you read the mood of the room? Can you sense how things are going for your fellow employees, even if they don’t directly tell or show you how they’re feeling? Observation skills are fundamental to social awareness. When you pay close attention to what’s happening around you, your awareness of your surroundings can help set the tone for how you approach varying situations.

For example, what is the feel of your workplace? Is there a good balance of intensity and fun, or does it swing too much one way? Is there so much intensity that it has turned into tension and employees are getting overwhelmed? Or is there so much good-natured fun that work is not getting done?

6. Notice the details

If you want to be connected to your employees and teammates, you need to keep your eyes open to your environment and really see what’s in front of you. Observe what’s happening with others. This isn’t about being seen, it’s about getting to know your coworkers as people and interpreting the mood of the team.

Ask questions to show that you’re interested. For example, did Kyle just put a new photo on his desk? Let him know you noticed and ask about his family’s latest vacation.

These tactics can be used by employees and bosses alike to improve social awareness and team cohesiveness. While the concepts of emotional intelligence are typically thought to be related to management and leadership positions, they apply equally to all team members within an organization. Concepts like empathy—helping others who are dealing with issues—can apply with peers, subordinates, and managers. Employees should be encouraged to “manage up” and help supervisors, executives, and owners to enhance their social awareness.

Each of the attributes we’ve covered builds on the others. Skills developed in the previously discussed areas of social awareness, self-management, and self-awareness all feed into success in this last area.

Relationship management is the ability to build value-adding relationships with others. A person strong in this trait understands and realizes the value of building relationships even with people with whom they don’t get along.

People with high relationship management abilities make everyone they interact with feel they matter and are valued. When they communicate with someone who has failed to complete a task or meet the expected delivery date or level of quality, it is done in such a way that the person knows where they missed the mark, but it is not done in anger. Relationship management requires taking intentional steps to ensure these positive connections are healthy and beneficial to both parties.

Employees need to understand how they can influence positive connections and teamwork in their personal and professional relationships.

Author Daniel Goleman, a recognized authority on EQ, says the competencies involved in managing relationships include:

- Developing others
- Inspirational leadership
- Change catalyst
- Influence
- Conflict management
- Teamwork and collaboration

These competencies are often viewed as leadership skills, but they are also relevant outside of leader-follower relationships. For example, **inspirational leadership** could apply to how you inspire and motivate a family member, a friend, or a peer at work. **Change catalyst** could apply when an employee finds a way to improve an existing process and needs to get their peers or managers on board with the change.

Conflict management is about learning to see conflict as an opportunity to grow closer to others. Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable in human relationships. Two people cannot possibly always have the same needs, opinions, and expectations—but that doesn't need to be a bad thing. **Resolving conflict** in healthy, constructive ways can strengthen trust between people. When conflict is not perceived as threatening or punishing, it fosters freedom, creativity, and safety in relationships.

One of the most toxic ways that poor relationship management manifests in the workplace is through gossip. Talking about others behind their backs is common practice in many workplaces, but it kills collaboration and culture. Leaders who tolerate this behavior are reinforcing low levels of relationship management and allowing it to hold back their organization.

There are many options for ways to impact the health of relationships, but Goleman suggests that assuming goodwill in others' intentions is one key. We can all struggle to see the positive intentions of others when their behavior results in us being hurt or feeling taken advantage of. When you consciously choose to assume others' intentions are positive, you are better able to offer constructive feedback when issues arise. By doing this, you're not ignoring the problem and you're not attacking the other person—which is how strong, trusting relationships are built.

Zack Hudson, in a recent *Passing the Baton Leadership Podcast* on relationship management, offers the following four tips to increase your relationship management.

1. **Back your decision up.** When you make a decision, especially if you know it may not be a popular one, explain the whys behind it so that others understand where you are coming from. Also be open to listen to their concerns and be prepared to change if needed.
2. **Be proactive with the inevitable.** When you see a conversation that needs to happen inevitably, the time to connect on it is now. Time has a way to fuel the problem and it ends with you and/or the other party boiling over. Hudson says, "I would rather take on a small problem than a work-stoppingly large problem that it morphs into later." When you have these conversations, be direct without emotional attachment and be sure to include your strengthened empathy and listening skills that you've picked up.
3. **Build trust.** A couple of ways to build trust in a relationship is to first be willing to accept feedback in a constructive way. When you show that you can't take feedback well, you lose the

trust of the other person and they no longer want to help you get better. The second is to own your mistakes and failures. If you are a leader you may have to own a mistake that you didn't even make the decision on. Being willing to do the small things like apologize, say thank you, and (show) appreciation go a long way.

4. **Acknowledge where the person is.** Someone comes to you and tells you what they are going through and you do your best to quickly move on from the conversation. It may be because it makes you uncomfortable or you don't know what to say. Simply acknowledging the emotion or struggle is a great starting point.

Creating a secure, supportive, and compassionate work environment may not sound like a typical ambition for business leaders but building this type of culture is what improves creativity, collaboration, and productivity. And a culture like that is a critical element in how you attract and retain talented, purposeful people.

More and more, research is proving that high levels of emotional intelligence are a critical factor in effective teamwork, improved decision making, and healthy organizational culture. In a recent article for Inc., Author Jessica Stillman writes that new research conducted by Harvard researchers and released by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that the best predictor of outstanding performance by groups was having members with particularly high levels of emotional intelligence. The researchers found that those with high EQ were far better at keeping their teams on task and working efficiently. They also seemed able to motivate their team members to work more diligently when completing individual work. These results aren't outliers. Research out of Columbia University suggests that the return on investment in improving your EQ is far higher than that for working to get smarter, and a recent Yale study showed that those with high emotional intelligence make dramatically better decisions.

Emotional intelligence can be nurtured and strengthened throughout our adulthood, with immediate benefits to our health, our relationships, and our work. Hopefully, this article has provided some insight into the elements of EQ and the benefits it offers for your people, yourself, and your organization, along with a view as to how you can begin to improve your emotional intelligence.

EQ is not just for managers and leaders ... and the impact to your company's culture and performance when having a team of emotionally intelligent people may just surprise you.