

Published in StateWide Magazine, LGMA-WA, February 2014.

Emotional intelligence: Important applications in local government

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Abstract

What is emotional intelligence and why should it matter in local government? This paper illustrates the reasons why emotional intelligence is important, what it is and isn't, and how emotions drive the way ratepayers, councillors, ministers, executives and staff behave. It also examines how problems, such as gossip and friction, are emotionally driven, and how emotionally intelligent strategies can be used to reduce and manage them. It concludes by outlining 5 ways to develop more emotional intelligence.

This article is based on a paper recently presented at an LGMA conference, for which the City of Greater Geraldton is thanked for their sponsorship.

Do emotions make any difference in local government?

Local government involves more than managing rates, roads and rubbish – it involves collaborating with, managing and serving people. People are not robots, they have emotions. They do not therefore simply respond to or act on information alone. Rather their responses are driven by their emotional reactions to the information or ideas presented. On their own, facts and figures do not influence people; feeling convinced (an emotion) of the value or importance of the facts and figures does.

Anyone who has watched their council make a decision can observe the influence that emotions make when a lobby group is pushing for a certain decision to be made. For instance, if they feel passionate (an emotion) about dog control and want tougher controls put in place, they are more likely to vote in favour of money being allocated to this cause than someone who feels indifferent towards dog control; and someone who resents (an emotion) controlling dogs in their district is likely to vote against it. All will have been presented with the same facts and figures. Each will respond differently.

The ultimate skill in ensuring that a vote is passed or your key messages and recommendations are acted upon is to manage the emotions involved, both in creating the desirable ones and reducing the unhelpful

ones. This requires high levels of emotional intelligence, skills that many of us may not have, as we are unlikely to have received tuition at school on such topics. Emotional intelligence involves a vital set of skills impacting on the success of local government that we now need to develop as adults.

Emotions are at the core of emotional intelligence and are relevant in any workplace. If you or your staff, contractors or councillors felt determined, motivated, confident or enthusiastic it would impact positively on work output, wouldn't it? Similarly, productivity may be lower if you all felt complacent, apathetic, humiliated, unwanted, shafted or stressed. Research has clearly shown that emotions impact on work productivity.

Feeling hopeful, is one such example. Hope, as defined by Dr Shane Lopez is, "the belief that the future will be better than the present and that you have the power to make it so". He found that employees who are excited about organisational goals and their own future in the organisation miss less work. In fact, he found that employees who feel hopeful at work have an increase in productivity of 14% over their less hopeful colleagues. He specifically researched a group of engineers and found that, "the more hopeful the engineer, the more likely he or she was to go to work. Over a course of twelve months, the high-hope engineers missed an average of 20 hours of work only, with many of them missing no days at all; the low-hope engineers missed more than ten days of work each, on average".

Hope, by the way, is not the same as feeling optimistic or engaging in wishing or positive thinking. Feeling hopeful leads people to take action to make the future better, whereas wishing is just a longing for a positive future without the backup action.

How much hope are you spreading and inspiring at work?

Which emotions you recognise, acknowledge, manage and foster in yourself and others could make a big difference to the ease with which your local government functions and which of your projects are completed and which fail.

Suffice it to say, ignoring emotions may be possible, but there are negative consequences if you do, such as less buy-in on decisions, more conflicts and misunderstandings, and diminished levels of employee engagement.

What is emotional intelligence?

At the conference I began by asking the audience to put their hands up to the question, "Who knows what emotional intelligence is?" No one raised his or her hand. In contrast, when I said, "Who doesn't?" nearly all hands went up. The rest probably didn't care!

Emotional intelligence is increasingly talked about but without most people knowing its exact meaning. The media doesn't help. It has perpetuated myths and nonsense on emotional intelligence making it very hard to know what is true. Let's make it clear.

The term emotional intelligence was coined in 1990 by two leading USA psychologists, Professors Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer. They'd been investigating what else, in addition to IQ, could help explain or predict people's successful adaptation to life. They are the pioneer researchers in the area. They continue to research it and have now developed a test of emotional intelligence that is commonly used around the world, the MSCEIT. (More information is available on our website.)

In addition, considerable research into emotional intelligence is being conducted in Australia, especially at Swinburne University under the direction of Professor Con Stough, and at Genos International under the guidance of Dr. Ben Palmer. They have also developed an emotional intelligence assessment: the Genos 360 EI inventory.

Emotional intelligence in the workplace is defined by Palmer and Stough as, "The skill with which you perceive, express, reason with and manage your own and others' emotions".

Their Genos model of emotional intelligence covers seven dimensions:

1. Emotional self-awareness: The ability to identify your emotions. This helps you to know why you do what you do.
2. Emotional expression: The ability to express your emotions clearly and safely. This is not about dumping your emotions on others.
3. Emotional awareness of others: The skill of perceiving and understanding others' emotions accurately, (not reading in something that isn't there).
4. Reasoning with emotions: The skill of utilising accurate emotional information in decision-making and integrating it with information from other sources. This is not the same as making emotional decisions.
5. Emotional self-management: The ability to manage your emotions. This is not just applied to unpleasant emotions, such as reducing anxiety, frustration or powerlessness; but is also the ability to be able to switch between emotions and to create and build helpful ones when they are needed.
6. Emotional management of others: The skill of influencing the emotions of others. As in level five this includes being able to help reduce unproductive emotions such as tension, disappointment or anger and also being able to foster helpful emotions such as inspiration, calm or enthusiasm.
7. Emotional self-control: The skill of effectively controlling strong emotions, such as panic, fear or

fury. It also applies to other strong emotions, such as feeling ecstatic. Ever tried to concentrate the day before the holiday of a lifetime?

Emotional intelligence isn't just one skill that you have or don't have. There are many different skills involved, just as there are in cognitive intelligence (IQ). Your skill levels will fluctuate across each dimension and vary according to the situation you are in. How skilled are you at each level? Do you know? If you don't it could be impacting on your success at work without your realising it.

It is important to say that EI complements IQ; it doesn't replace it. IQ is still important, as are technical skills. In addition, people's personalities, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, ages, religious beliefs, gender and luck also contribute to their success.

What emotional intelligence isn't.

It's important to clarify what emotional intelligence isn't. At many of my presentations I get predictable cheeky remarks, such as "We're in for a group hug are we Rachel?" and "Are you going to make us warm and fuzzy?" No! Fortunately, this isn't what emotional intelligence is about.

There is nothing warm or fuzzy about feeling indignant, worried, inadequate, scared, insecure, abused, cheated, or helpless; yet these are all emotions, and all emotions that occur at work. Emotional intelligence involves the full range of emotions. Similarly, emotional intelligence is not about making people happy, or saying "yes" to people. Nor is it about being emotional. Being emotional may be no more intelligent than ignoring or repressing emotions.

What benefits can emotional intelligence bring to local government?

In research conducted by Palmer and Stough employees who had higher levels of emotional intelligence coped better with organisational stress, had less absenteeism and higher job satisfaction. In other words, people with lower levels of emotional intelligence could be having a detrimental effect at work. How much does absenteeism cost your local government?

Also, there are increasing amounts of economic data that demonstrate that people with higher levels of emotional intelligence (EI) economically outperform those who have lower levels of EI. For example, David Rosete, from the University of Wollongong, found that, "Executives who achieved superior business outcomes scored higher on the EI ability test. The ability measure of EI predicted effective leadership over and above well-established workplace measures such as reasoning ability and personality...". How emotionally intelligent are your executive team?

How emotional intelligence can help to reduce gossip

Gossip can be very destructive; it can undermine a change process, reduce team harmony and destroy an organisation's reputation. Gossip however is driven by emotions and emotional intelligence can therefore be valuable in its management. The emotions that drive it may vary from jealousy and feeling intimidated through to feeling vulnerable, left out or bitter.

For example, I once helped a manager who had two members of staff who weren't talking to each other. It turned out that one of the women had held an afternoon tea in the staff room, and had not invited the other one.

He'd called them into his office and laid down the rules about workplace communication and what he expected of them. In other words he gave them knowledge. Guess what? Their behaviour didn't change. Why? Because the emotions underneath the behavior had not altered as a result of the information.

I helped him plan a meeting with them to talk about the emotions involved. This is a very simple description of the procedure but he basically did three things.

His first step was to ask the woman who was not invited, "How did you feel?" It turns out she had felt slighted, ignored and hurt – and isolated. She wasn't very skilled in managing such emotions, (many of us aren't) and instead of facing the person directly she sought revenge and had fallen into back-stabbing. (Many women are brought up to believe they should be "nice" and that "nice girls don't get angry", so they can feel uncomfortable dealing with anger should it arise.)

What do you think the second step or question would be? Many people want to know "Why?". Why did you feel like that? Why weren't you invited? Why didn't you tell her? Why? Why? Why? They want to analyse the emotions and to criticise the behavior. In my experience this may not lead anywhere useful and people can become bogged down and waste time. The emotions have been felt, end of story – people are entitled to feel whatever emotions they feel. Emotional intelligence does not say emotions are good or bad, they just are. What the person does in response to the emotions is what matters.

The second question the manager asked was not why, but "How would you like to feel?" The woman who had felt ignored said, "Included". This is logical. Research shows that emotions are far more predictable and logical than many of us have been brought up to believe.

The third question the manager asked was, "What can be done to help you feel included?". Between them they generated a series of actions that could be taken, one of which was for her to organize the next staff function and to invite everyone. The problem was solved. Why? Because the emotions that were

driving the behavior shifted to more productive ones – she felt she belonged.

The manger hadn't become a counsellor, he had merely used emotional intelligence skills to get the two women to improve their behaviour.

People issues always involve emotions – to be able to manage people you need to be aware of and able to manage emotions, yours and theirs. By being aware of how you feel and managing these feelings well, you have more choice and control over how effective you are.

You may doubt whether you can control anyone else's feelings but it is certainly possible to influence the emotions of the people around you by what you say and do, by what you don't say or do, and by how you speak and behave.

Do you know the emotional impact that you have on people and how they feel about working for you or with you? It could make the difference between high staff turn-over and staff loyalty. It could help reduce team conflicts or increase them. It could bring greater buy-in from suppliers and service providers or result in a lack of co-operation.

Five steps in applying emotional intelligence skills when working in local government

There is so much to know about emotional intelligence and the skills you can develop at an individual level, a team level and an organisational level. This article is only a brief introduction. For now, though here are 5 key steps you can take to develop your emotional intelligence further.

1. Become emotionally self-aware. Be on the lookout for your emotions and acknowledge them when they are there. For example, you might watch your feelings when you need to give feedback, or you receive feedback. In my experience, people avoid giving honest, direct performance feedback when they feel uncomfortable, awkward or anxious, and instead say nothing or soften what they say. In contrast, people can become defensive or aggressive on receiving critical feedback because they feel dismayed, hurt or scared. If you recognise your emotions you can be more effective. How you learn to do this is an article in itself!

2. Know your emotional wake. What emotions do you leave behind with people when you have interacted with them, whether it is a ratepayer at the front counter, a colleague from another section, or a phone call with a Shire President? How are they feeling after you have finished? Do you know? Start to monitor this. It is an important part of dimension three – being able to read other people's emotions accurately. You need to understand the emotional impact you have on people, as it has a direct impact on the influence you have. Even if you are not aware of how they feel after meeting with you – they will

know and will remember.

3. Consider the emotions of change. Change is common to all local governments, and whether you are managing an amalgamation or a change in rates, emotions are always pivotal to the success of the process. Choose how to inform people of your decisions based on accurate predictions of how they will feel on hearing your news. The emotions of change may include shock, anger, guilt, anxiety, resignation and more. Communicate the information in the way that will best help people hear and act on your information rather than making them feel disillusioned, shattered or alarmed. Managing the emotions of change is another big topic on its own, but just thinking about what emotions need to be handled is an excellent starting point.

4. Express genuine feelings of pride, appreciation and gratitude. People like to feel appreciated, valued and rewarded, at work. Research shows that when immediate managers express these feelings to staff it increases employee engagement. You may have far greater impact if you name specific emotions, e.g. "Thanks so much for meeting this difficult deadline. I appreciate (emotion) the hard work you've put in to make it possible and am proud (emotion) of you for doing it so quickly," than if you say, "Good job, well done."

People may come to work because they are paid to do a job, but that doesn't mean that praise is unnecessary – it is a huge motivator for many people, and someone who feels motivated will be more productive than someone who feels unappreciated. It is simple really! Whatever level of the organisation you work in, you can express feelings of appreciation to those around you, and not just to staff but to councillors, ratepayers and visitors too. I am sure the Minister wouldn't mind a bit of sincere praise either!

5. Develop your ability to stay calm. It is unrealistic to expect people to always be "nice" friendly or pleasant to deal with – no local government has only these people. This means it is very important that you take active steps to manage your own emotions, so that you can be genuinely calm when dealing with them. By this I don't mean gritting your teeth and using a forced smile until they've gone and then slamming the phone down and saying "bastard", I mean genuinely not having an internal feeling of anything other than calm kindness. This is a high level of emotional intelligence but there are many techniques and strategies that you can practise to develop them, and that can be taught to your staff. The most extensively researched ones being loving-kindness meditation and mindfulness, and others such as the simple energy (tapping) technique (SET) and Tai Chi have also been found useful. However, simply having the goal at the start of each day, "Today I will keep calm" is an important step.

Finally, if you think your team have missed the boat when it comes to high levels of emotional intelligence, the good news is that research shows that emotional intelligence skills can improve with

training. Ernest O'Boyle, et al. split employees into two groups, one received emotional intelligence training and the control group didn't. There were statistically significant differences in performance between the control group and the emotional intelligence group independent of the effects of personality and cognitive intelligence.

We are all works in progress. We have had years of education in IQ and cognitive tasks, but not in emotional intelligence. Now is the time to catch up and hone your emotional intelligence skills. What will you do to improve the EI skills in your local government team?

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