

How effective leaders use emotional intelligence

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What makes a good leader?

Most of us can readily think of qualities of a good leader, including: “performs well under pressure”, “sets high standards”, “makes the most of their and others’ ability”, “always gives 100%” and “good team player”. The best leaders develop a good understanding of themselves and others and apply what is known as social or “emotional” intelligence.

In this article we discuss *Emotional Intelligence (EI)*, considering how it can be utilized in becoming an effective leader. Three questions are considered:

- What is EI?
- How do effective leaders use EI?
- How can you develop your EI skills?

What is Emotional Intelligence (EI)?

Intelligence can be thought of as our ability to learn and apply reason. It shapes who we are, what we are interested in and how we develop.

There are many different types of intelligence including linguistic, logical, and bodily. Early in the 20th Century, social intelligence was defined “the ability to act wisely in human relations” (Thorndike, 1920). It was later suggested that intelligence comprised “seven components” (Gardener, 1983) including interpersonal intelligence (understanding the intentions, motivations and desires of other people) and intrapersonal intelligence (understanding oneself, one's feelings, fears and motivations)

More recently a framework for emotional intelligence was presented and defined as “a set of skills contributing to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan and achieve in one's life” (Salovey and Meyer, 1990)

Subsequently, in the book “Emotional Intelligence” (Goleman, 1995), EI was separated into 4 parts:

- Self Awareness: a deep understanding of your emotions, strengths and weaknesses, and an ability to assess and develop self-worth
- Self Regulation: the control of one's emotions, the ability to stay calm, clear and focused when things do not go as planned, the ability for self motivation and initiative
- Social Awareness: empathy, including the ability to consider employees' feelings during the process of making individual/group decisions
- Social skills: the ability to communicate, influence, collaborate and work with colleagues.

In summary, Emotional Intelligence is a series of personal and social competencies.

How do effective leaders use Emotional Intelligence (EI)?

Effective leaders use EI for a variety of purposes:

a) To build Trust

Leaders can significantly influence the attitudes, performance, and satisfaction of employees. Where trust is lacking, performance suffers. Managers who regulate their emotions and demonstrate empathy for their employees built more effective relationships.

b) To face up to feedback

Increasingly, managers can gain feedback via a 360-degree evaluation, where they receive anonymous feedback from their supervisor, peers, and direct reports. Leaders who take seriously their impact on others, modify their behavior to achieve positive business results.

c) To adapt

Top performers in management are open to new information and can let go of old assumptions, thus adapting their actions and attitudes to the new environment. They can think "out of the box," and apply new ideas and creativity to improve results.

d) To develop influence

Accurate reading of political situations, understanding the forces that shape the views and actions of customers, colleagues and competitors, and the building of social networks are all crucial to coalition building and the development of influence.

e) To develop others

Sensing what others need in order to develop their abilities is a key management skill. Mentoring, offering objective feedback and identifying challenges opportunities are key to growing your employees.

How can you develop your EI skills?

Emotional Intelligence, like other technical skills, can be developed through a systematic and consistent approach to building competence in personal and social skills. However, the pathways in the brain associated with social and emotional competencies are different than those used by cognitive learning. They are developed early on in life and reinforced over the years. Changing these habits requires focus and discipline.

What practical steps can you take?

a) Observe yourself and others.

Notice when you're feeling specific emotions. Observe others' responses to you and detect your reaction to verbal and nonverbal responses such as expression, voice tone, and body language.

b) Interpret your observations

Identify patterns in your reactions. For example, you might find that you tend to respond in anger when you've had a stressful day or a peer demands more of your time than you have available.

c) Defuse destructive emotions

Develop ways to avoid losing emotional control. Pausing for several moments during a conflict, taking a sip of coffee or shifting your physical position may help you to avoid being overwhelmed.

d) Engage reason

While high emotion is defused, evaluate decision-making strategies and determine how best to address the situation at hand.

e) Reflect

At the end of each day, review the day's emotional encounters. Decide whether you acted in ways consistent with your intentions during those encounters. If not, identify ideas for alignment.

Summary

One is not born with Emotional Intelligence. It is a set of personal and social skills (including observation and reflection) that are improved through practice and discipline. Such skills can be used to build trust, increase influence and develop others. Organizations are quickly recognizing that EI is a key component of becoming an effective and motivating leader. Understanding your own emotions as well as others' is therefore a practical and important contributor towards your success.

References

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