

Emotional Intelligence: Why is it Crucial for Leaders?



“I don’t know why she didn’t just ask me before making that decision; “I can’t tell whether he liked the presentation or not”; “He didn’t even apologise for his outburst in the meeting yesterday!”

Emotional Intelligence has become a buzzword in the field of people development. It is long overdue that it has come into the spotlight, but we are finding that the concept is not well understood. In our work with organisations, we often hear statements from team members like those listed above, and they are evidence of how demotivating it is to have leaders who lack Emotional Intelligence. Yet if you were to ask those leaders, they would likely say they have high Emotional Intelligence.

Technically proficient individuals frequently struggle with people skills after promotion into leadership roles. But leadership requires a different skill set, and many organisations do not equip incoming leaders with the tools to create productive, motivated, well and happy team members. These outcomes require Emotional Intelligence.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional Intelligence (often referred to as EQ as a measure of Emotional Intelligence) is defined *as a group of emotional and social skills that collectively establish how we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges and use emotional information in a meaningful way* (Multi-Health Systems Inc., 2011). This definition encompasses multiple dimensions of Emotional Intelligence but in short, it is how we understand ourselves and others, and for leaders to lead from a place of that understanding.

Unlike Intelligence Quotient (IQ), which is relatively fixed, Emotional Intelligence is a skill that can be developed throughout one's life. This is encouraging news for leaders at any stage of their career.

Emotional Intelligence Skills for Leaders

Emotional Intelligence skills include how leaders manage themselves, how they manage their reputation and brand, how they build solid relationships with others, how they problem solve, make decisions, and navigate stress. If you are thinking, "I wish they taught me this when I went into leadership," you are not alone. Many leaders we work with want to lead with Emotional Intelligence (they do not often name it as such), but they have never been given the language or training to support this desire. This is no one's fault; as the research has grown, we now see the value in ensuring that Emotional Intelligence is a critical tool in the leader's toolbox.

Why is Emotional Intelligence important?

Multiple research studies have indicated that higher levels of Emotional Intelligence are positively correlated with leadership effectiveness, positive managerial practices and improved health and wellbeing (Sheeba & Rebekah, 2023; Xianjun, 2022; Gransberry, 2021). In addition, Kandi Weins, in her 2024 book *Burnout Immunity*, highlights that by building Emotional Intelligence skills, individuals can manage their stress better. By improving self-awareness about emotions and stress triggers, regulating emotional responses to stressors, building meaningful interpersonal connections, and reframing approaches to stressors, individuals can enhance their stress management and protect themselves from burnout. (Weins, 2024).

What are the key components that make up Emotional Intelligence?

Self-Perception: How do I view myself?

Self-perception refers to having a deep understanding of yourself, your emotions, and your internal life, including what triggers big responses. This ability to 'see oneself,' enables you to regulate emotions and express yourself effectively. A leader with strong self-perception is likely to be comfortable with who they are, generally positive about themselves and life, and in touch with their emotions. They can recognise the nuances of emotions and understand how their behaviours impact others. It is also the ability to read a room and gauge emotional dynamics accurately. This is the friend who makes you feel heard and knows what you need without you having to say anything.

Self-Expression: How do I express myself?

Have you ever listened to someone speak and thought, "Wow, they captured that point so clearly"? That is self-expression; the ability to communicate authentically and openly, fostering healthy relationships. Leaders with strong self-expression skills are self-directed and can confidently articulate their thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner. For example, leaders who provide clear and direct feedback - both positive and negative - build trust and psychological safety within their teams.

Interpersonal Relationships: How do I build and maintain healthy relationships?

Human beings need and seek connection. The ability to build and sustain meaningful relationships provides you with a support network, helps you navigate challenges, and facilitates growth through feedback. Leaders with strong interpersonal skills are approachable, empathic and want to contribute to a greater cause such as the development of people. They are connectors in social circles, capable of giving and receiving honest feedback in a safe and constructive way. Unlike many of the superficial connections of social media, this skill emphasises deep, high-quality relationships that require time and effort to develop. Leaders with this skill always appear to have time for people, even if they are busy.

Making Decisions: How do I make decisions?

When you are under pressure with competing demands, how are you able to use emotional information (observed in yourself and your team members), to make decisions? Leaders who have this skill often feel competent, calm and grounded because they can make decisions by considering and speaking into, the emotional climate of the moment. It is the friend or leader who, under extreme pressure, calmly surveys the lay of the land, weighs out the options and is methodical in how they approach the issue, without being derailed by emotions.

Managing Stress: How do I manage stress?

According to the American Psychological Society, resilience enables you to “bounce back” after experiencing difficult life events such as significant change, stress, adversity or hardship. Most importantly, it incorporates the concept of emerging from adversity stronger and more resourceful. Having a toolkit of coping strategies for stress, based on a clear understanding of yourself, builds confidence and a sense of security. This in turn builds resilience. Leaders with strong stress management skills are likely to respond to challenges with composure, view change positively, and implement strategies to remain calm under pressure.

Each of these components play a crucial role in emotional and social functioning, influencing personal and professional performance.

Can we measure Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional Intelligence assessments (often called EQ assessments) are used in various contexts, to help individuals understand their strengths and areas for development. These assessments support personal and professional growth by enhancing emotional skills. In organisational settings, Emotional Intelligence assessments are valuable for talent selection and leadership development, as they provide insight beyond technical competence, shedding light on how individuals are likely to manage their emotions in the workplace. These assessments are useful in career development, guiding individuals along their professional journeys. Additionally, they exist for children and adolescents, helping them build Emotional Intelligence from an early age.

Selecting the right assessment tool

A quick online search for “Emotional Intelligence/EQ assessment” will yield numerous options. However,

it is critical to ensure that the chosen tool is reliable and valid within your specific context. The assessment should be supported by research and have appropriate norms (a benchmark group for comparison) for your country. Selecting the wrong tool can lead to inaccurate conclusions and potential harm. A valid assessment tool should measure what it claims to measure and be grounded in scientific research. These assessments are best administered and debriefed by a trained psychologist to ensure accuracy and meaningful interpretation.

Where to begin

To begin improving your Emotional Intelligence skills:

Assess your current level: Take an assessment to understand your baseline.

Focus on areas of strength and improvement: Once you and your team members understand their Emotional Intelligence profile, you can create learning and development interventions that build these skills.

Support and Accountability: Having done the assessment and received learning and development interventions to set you on your journey, it is powerful when leaders partner to support and hold one another accountable.

Reassess: This can be done every couple of years to monitor how you and your team are doing, and to continuously improve.

Whether you aim to improve self-awareness, self-expression, relationship-building, stress management, or decision-making, developing your EQ can significantly enhance both your leadership abilities and overall quality of life.

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