



Emotional intelligence

When people in units interact, emotions are experienced, are shared, and often clash. Processing emotion is critical for leaders, and it is not purely a leadership function. Everyone has a responsibility to develop appropriate emotional expression techniques. Improving emotional awareness, understanding, and regulation can have far-reaching implications for improving your life and relationships.

This briefing defines emotional intelligence, describes how it works, and summarizes some research findings, including criticisms of “emotional intelligence” as a construct. It concludes with basic tips to improve your emotional intelligence at work and beyond.

Emotional Intelligence Defined

Emotional intelligence research, popularized by Daniel Goleman, began around 1990 with the work of Salovey and Mayer. They defined emotional intelligence as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions.” Joseph and Newman, influential emotional intelligence scholars, suggest emotion perception, understanding, and regulation describe emotional intelligence. There are many definitions; these encompass the majority.

How it works

Emotional Recognition

Emotionally-intelligent people perceive emotions better than their counterparts. Psychology research shows that people vary in their ability to “read people,” that is, recognize emotions. This is true for the general population and especially evident in some clinical conditions¹. Emotional intelligence helps you navigate the social world. The ability to recognize emotions in yourself and those around you enables awareness of and access to another level of communication and understanding beyond cognition and the spoken word. This is especially important when dealing with emotionally-stable people on bad days and when

interacting with those whose emotions are unpredictable, partially concealed, or intense.

Understanding and Regulation: Self-Knowledge

Recognizing your own emotions helps you manage them appropriately. Emotions find ways of emerging, often in counterproductive ways, if not managed. For example, if you don’t recognize that you are angry and process it constructively, your anger can emerge in inappropriate ways or at inappropriate times, sometimes quite remote from the original source. Another example is that fear of failure can manifest as procrastination. Recognition of the emotion supports introspection. You can ask yourself questions like “why do I feel this way?”, “where is this coming from? Is this about me or the situation?”, and “how can I express this constructively?” Perception precedes and enables understanding. Understanding precedes and enables regulation.

“PERCEPTION ENABLES UNDERSTANDING. UNDERSTANDING ENABLES REGULATION.”

It is even possible to adjust your emotional state purposefully. For example, if you feel anxious about the future of something, you can imagine the worst case scenario and how you would handle it. Once you have planned in your mind for the worst you can imagine, you may feel less anxious. Another effective technique is to imagine giving advice to a friend about the situation, and then reassessing your own reaction. By then, you will likely have built more confidence that, no matter how bad it is, you will be able to handle it.

¹ For example, there are several diagnoses documented in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) that involve impediments to emotion recognition. Schizophrenia is an extreme example.





Many emotionally-intelligent people find this and other introspective techniques helpful for managing their emotional state.

▶ Emotionally-intelligent people are not ruled by their emotions.

Understanding and Regulation: Social Knowledge

Recognizing emotions in others allows you to choose appropriate times and places to engage them: if you can see someone is pre-occupied or upset about something, you may be able to delay a difficult conversation to a time when he or she is on a better emotional footing and your conversation is more likely to be productive. Emotionally-intelligent people are also good at providing appropriate emotional support and advice. They are good at intuiting not only the emotional states of others, but likely reasons for them. These abilities can help you navigate turbulent emotional waters at work, and elsewhere.

Emotional intelligence also provides insights into how your expression of emotions affects others and how their expressions affect you. This can help you identify emotional toxicity in your environs, enact appropriate boundaries, and make decisions that channel your emotional labor in conscious, constructive pathways.

The Value of Emotional Intelligence

People perceive leaders as stronger and more effective when the leaders demonstrate effective emotional intelligence. Your awareness and management of your emotions can help others manage their own emotions, or at least how they are expressed at work. This modeling and emotion-management can be a critical component of a healthy work culture, where conflict is managed constructively. Research indicates that emotionally-intelligent leaders are more responsible, disciplined, self-controlled performers. Unit members with emotionally-intelligent leaders are more likely to be committed to the unit, the institution, and the leader's vision. People with more emotional intelligence are

better performers, experience more positive affect, and are more creative. Better group performance is associated with emotional intelligence, as is satisfaction with other group members, improved communication, and increased social support. Emotional intelligence improves effectiveness and is especially critical for leaders.

Increased emotional intelligence has an interesting relationship with self-perception of leadership skills. Lower emotional intelligence is associated with overrating one's own skills; *higher* is associated with *underrating* those skills.

Criticisms of Emotional Intelligence Research, Theories

There is a lot on emotional intelligence in the popular press, and much of it is not backed by solid research findings. Emotional intelligence research findings are mixed and the theoretical foundations are weak. The concept is appealing intuitively, which may account for its popularity despite the absence of consistent research.

One challenge for emotional intelligence research is the measurement and evaluation of emotional intelligence. Usually, researchers ask survey participants to rate their own and/or others' emotional intelligence. However, by definition, those low on emotional intelligence will have difficulty recognizing emotional awareness, and their responses on emotional intelligence questions will thus be biased. This contributes to error in the study of emotional intelligence, and thus to the lack of strong and consistent research findings for something that seems intuitively important.

Though catchy, the name "emotional intelligence" is sometimes characterized as not really apt. Intelligence is an enduring trait, whereas knowledge and skills are developmental. Research shows that people can increase their ability to distinguish between emotions, can manage them, and can use this information to change behaviors: the entire endeavor of psychotherapy relies on the ability of patients to grow in emotional





intelligence. A better way to think about the concept is to consider it “emotional skills” rather than intelligence.

High levels of skill in managing one’s own and others’ emotions is not all good. While these skills can be used to help create healthy workplaces, they can also be misused to manipulate and leverage emotions. This behavior is especially common in narcissistic, machiavellian, and psychopathological people who manipulate situations to their own advantage; and it can contribute to toxic workplaces.

The popularization of emotional intelligence has contributed to a cadre of amateur psychologists. Styling yourself as high in EI does not give *carte blanche* to diagnose or treat your unit members. As a leader, your portfolio and responsibility is for workplace conduct, and your actions should be based on conduct, not your assessment of emotions or motives. Improving your own emotional intelligence does increase your skill in understanding emotions, modeling appropriate expressions, and developing and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Improving Emotional Skills

While conscientiousness, cognitive ability, and emotional stability are precursors of emotional intelligence, they are not determinative. Emotional intelligence is a skill, and this means it can be developed.

Self-knowledge

What triggers you or sets you off? Are there people or situations that are difficult for you? Many avoid this kind of introspection because it is difficult and uncomfortable.

Yet, the only way to overcome these challenges is to face them. Self-deception is a hinderance to emotional growth.

“AVOID ‘I FEEL LIKE...’ STATEMENTS. CHOOSE A MORE EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT PHRASE.”

Periodically, stop to reflect on how your interactions affected your mood or reactions. Many ancient philosophers recommended reflection of this kind at the end of the day when experiences are fresh. Some find that journaling can help, as it can expose patterns of behaviors and interactions that may not be consciously noted in real time. A reflective practice also allows you to see the progress you are making towards greater emotional comfort and skill.

Emotional Vocabulary

A key to emotional awareness is being able to recognize and then name your emotions. Thus, developing your emotional vocabulary is a step towards emotional skill-building. There are many taxonomies of emotions. One recent example is in the appendix, as well as a list of other resources. Explore them a bit to see if one is helpful during your introspection and reflection.

Emotionally-Skillful Conversations

Many people do not know how to talk about emotions, recognize them, name them, process them, or express them. This is a major impediment to the growth of emotional intelligence. Consider this situation. You are in conversation with someone who says “I feel like you are not listening to me.” This statement is

actually a cognitive judgment, not a statement of emotion. Likely, the person feels some combination of anger, frustration, disappointment, dejection, despondency, or sadness because he or she *thinks, believes, or concludes* you are not listening. Using the words “feel like” confuses emotions with an associated cognitive appraisal. People’s emotional responses to situations are not uniform. Cloaking emotions in simile or metaphor obfuscates already complex cognitive-emotional realities.

As a rule, avoid following the word “feel” with the word “like.” Instead, follow it with an emotion word, like “happy” or “dismayed.” Modeling this for your unit members can influence their own emotional growth and

▶ There are several techniques for improving emotional intelligence.

Introspection and Reflection





awareness and move the unit towards an emotionally-intelligent climate.

Thinking in an Emotionally-Skillful Way

Emotionally skillful discourse should not be limited to communication with others. How you communicate with yourself and with others are mutually reinforcing. Many extend the think-versus-feel confusion into their own internal cognitive processing, and this can be a barrier to emotional development. Consider your internal monologue—that voice inside you — and practice think-versus-feel awareness at this level. Listen for “I feel like...” when you mean “I think that...” Practice juxtaposing (“I feel [emotion] and think [thought]”) to help you learn to parse your thoughts, feelings, and how they interrelate.

Seek Out Emotionally-Skillful People

Habits form and are reinforced in part by the company we keep. Role modeling and social reinforcement influence emotional skills. Especially important when growing your emotional skills, exposure to emotionally healthy individuals with good emotional boundaries and skills gives you a vision and role models that help your development.

As a leader, think about this when engaged in hiring and retention. Emotionally-skillful people contribute to healthy work units. Conversely, a few without emotional skill can tax a unit’s health, and especially influence others without strong emotional skill.

Developmental Conversations

There are a variety of resources to help you develop emotional intelligence. Psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical counselors, and some professional coaches are trained to guide your emotional awareness and help you explore the concepts and develop skills. For the religiously inclined, your church may have trained counselors who can also help. Professionals can serve as a sounding board, provide an opportunity to articulate feelings you otherwise wouldn’t, to do so in a safe environment, and to help hold you accountable for

your continuing development. Professionals can help you develop a greater awareness of the link between emotion and cognition, and how they influence each other, which in turn can help you gain better control and increased emotional intelligence. Some friends or family may have a natural talent for listening and can be helpful in talking through emotionally-laden events and can point out patterns that we ourselves do not see.

Leader Modeling

Emotional intelligence can become a feature of your unit, like any other behavior. Just as with other cultural and climate features, a leader has enormous influence. Though appropriate modeling, discussion, and promoting awareness, you can guide your unit into a more emotionally-intelligent place. For example, “I hear your concern and recognize that you are angry. This is difficult for your lab mate right now because of a recent loss; the problem you raise is important. Let’s revisit this in a week when he may be more receptive and able to participate in finding a better solution than we have now.”

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence is like teaching. Being good at it is both trait- and experience-based. There are aspects of personality and skill involved. Those “born with it” have an easier time learning and improving in this area; most of us, though, can improve our emotional intelligence through application, conscious effort, and practice. While the research on emotional intelligence is conflicting, we know that emotional intelligence generally makes for better employees, members, leaders, and communities. Increasing emotional intelligence doesn’t make you a psychologist. It will improve your life and leadership abilities though better relationship and communication skills.





Appendix: Emotional Vocabulary

Cowen and Keltner— 27 Categories

- **Admiration:** Feeling impressed, pride, amazement
- **Adoration:** Love, adoration, happiness
- **Aesthetic appreciation:** Awe, calmness, wonder
- **Amusement:** Amusement, laughter, humor
- **Anger:** Anger, angry disgust, boiling with anger
- **Anxiety:** Anxiety, fear, nervousness
- **Awe:** Awe, amusement, feeling impressed
- **Awkwardness:** Amused embarrassment, embarrassment
- **Boredom:** Boredom, annoyance, interest
- **Calmness:** Calmness, peacefulness, serenity
- **Confusion:** Confusion, curiosity, interested confusion
- **Craving:** Hunger, desire, satiation of hunger
- **Disgust:** Disgust, feeling nauseated, extreme disgust
- **Empathetic pain:** Pain, empathetic pain, shock
- **Entrancement:** Interest, amazement, feeling intrigued
- **Excitement:** Excitement, adrenaline rush, awe
- **Fear:** Fear, scared, extreme fear
- **Horror:** Shock, horror, feeling scared
- **Interest:** Amazement, feeling intrigued
- **Joy:** Happiness, extreme happiness, love
- **Nostalgia:** Nostalgia, boredom, reminiscence
- **Relief:** Relief, deep relief, sense of narrow escape
- **Romance:** Love, romantic love, romance
- **Sadness:** Sadness, extreme sadness, sympathy
- **Satisfaction:** Feeling impressed, satisfaction, awestruck surprise.
- **Sexual desire:** Sexual arousal, lust, sexual desire
- **Surprise:** Surprise, shock, amazement

Adapted from Cowen, A. S., & Keltner, D. (2017). Self-report captures 27 distinct categories of emotion bridged by continuous gradients. *PNAS*. Note: Repeated words are an artifact of the methods. The word before the colon is a category name. The words after are how participants freely described that category; the category was not always included in the free response for that category.

Other Taxonomies

There are many other taxonomies, such as the following, which are available online. Find one that helps you develop your emotional vocabulary.

1. Tiffany Watt Smith in *The Book of Human Emotions* catalogues 154 emotions.
2. Robert Plutchick offers his “Wheel of Emotions”, which contains 32 and shows relative intensity.
3. Parrot and Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O’Connor describe a tree of emotions moving from basic to more precise, which shows relationships between lower and higher order emotions.
4. The Human-Machine Interaction Network on Emotion (HUMAINE) offers a classification of 48 emotions in the “Emotion Annotation and Representation Language” (EARL).

