

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND LEADERSHIP: WHY THE 'SOFT SKILLS' MATTER

The last few decades have witnessed a continuous growth in interest in the area of leadership, with both managers and leadership researchers searching to identify those behaviours that increase a leader's effectiveness. In spite of sustained research, there appears to be little emerging consensus regarding what characteristics combine to make a truly effective leader. Furthermore, there are notable gaps between academic theorising and the practical utility of leadership theories. Most professionals are aware of leaders with diverse characteristics and management styles who consistently deliver above average outcomes.

Recently, investigations into the use of Emotional Intelligence as a predictor of effective leadership have gained the attention of researchers and recruiters alike. Emotional Intelligence (EI) can be generally defined as a set of non-cognitive competencies that are linked to interpersonal effectiveness or "people skills" at work. More specifically, EI includes the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use that information to guide one's thinking and actions (Salovey and Mayer, 1993 in Abraham, 1999).

Emotional Intelligence has become extremely popular within the fields of Management and Organisational psychology because it is thought to underlie various aspects of workplace performance and success not accounted for by traditional intelligence measures or personality. Numerous studies highlight that traditional forms of intelligence only account for 20 percent of overall success at work (Goleman, 1995). That leaves 80 percent of the variance unaccounted for. With personality and motivation measures approximately contributing another ten percent to the puzzle, there still seems to be a lot we do not know about what makes some individuals perform better or why some of us are always a step ahead in the 'career stakes'. Hence, measuring Emotional Intelligence or the 'softer skills', as they are often known, may yield important information that differentiates between who will be an effective leader or distinguishes high from low performers across differing work roles.

Linking Emotional Intelligence to leadership effectiveness

Research on emotions in the workplace suggests that emotions may drive many productivity gains, innovations, and accomplishments of individuals, teams and organisations (Cooper, 1997). Individuals with high Emotional Intelligence are said to be more effective at leading and managing others and fostering positive attitudes amongst employees. Furthermore, individuals high on EI are also said to be good organisational citizens and better overall performers (Sosik and Megerian, 1999; George, 2000; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001).

Recent Emotional Intelligence research (see Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey, 2002; Sosik & Megerian, 1999) suggests that Emotional Intelligence plays an important role in leadership effectiveness. George (2000) states that EI enhances a leader's ability to recognise and solve issues facing them and their organisation. Specifically, he proposes that leaders high on Emotional Intelligence are able to accurately recognise emotions and are more able to determine whether emotions are linked to work opportunities or obstacles. Therefore, they can effectively utilise their emotions in their decision-making process (George, 2000). Furthermore, Caruso et al. (2002) argue that leaders who are able to use emotions to guide decision-making are able to motivate their employees, and encourage open-minded idea generation, decision-making and planning, because they can consider multiple points of view. Additionally, a leader high in Emotional Intelligence, who is able to accurately appraise how their employees feel, can use this information to influence their employees' emotions to ensure that they are receptive and supportive of the organisation's goals (Caruso et al., 2002; George, 2000).

How Emotional Intelligence testing can help Organisations

Research findings have been fairly consistent in concluding that successful job performance and training performance are related to both cognitive and emotional factors. Accordingly, in today's competitive business world, where many leaders seem to have an MBA or similar university qualification, and given a broadly equivalent level of cognitive ability, Emotional Intelligence has the potential to become a core differentiator in terms of selecting the best leaders for your organisation. Lack of interpersonal sensitivity, personal flexibility and emotional resilience have tremendous capacity today to wreck the career prospects of highly intelligent, qualified, and experienced professionals. Being able to perform intellectual gymnastics counts for little if the individual is a source of friction in the team, has difficulty dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, and is emotionally ill equipped to handle stress and criticism.

Emotional Intelligence has benefits beyond the managerial and leadership sphere. It also has a useful purpose for positions where a high degree of interpersonal effectiveness is required, such as in customer service and sales roles. Emotional Intelligence assessment is an ideal technique for differentiating between candidates early in the recruitment process, without adding significant time or cost to the overall process. Given the limitations of purely using intelligence or ability testing, a recruitment process which incorporates both cognitive and Emotional Intelligence assessments is likely to be a stronger predictor of successful occupational performance, and is therefore a more reliable way in which to select the most appropriate and highest performing personnel.

The other force driving the popularity of Emotional Intelligence testing as part of the recruitment paradigm has been the suggestion by its advocates that unlike traditional forms of intelligence and personality, which are relatively fixed, Emotional Intelligence can be learnt. Therefore, through a well-designed training program based on the assessment of EI, employees can learn to use and enhance the competencies associated with Emotional Intelligence, and consequently increase both individual and organisational performance. Thus, when it comes to recruiting the best leaders for your organisation, the “soft skills” really do matter.

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Helpful hints for identifying signs of high Emotional Intelligence in an Interview

- Is able to read non-verbal communication
- Adapts own interaction style to suit the environment and the audience
- Clearly articulates own feelings and behaviour and how that affects their work
- Is emotionally resilient and able to handle situations of conflict appropriately
- Balances feelings with reason and logic
- Can easily pick-up on the emotional overtones of workplace environments

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