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Evaluating the Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Leadership
Performance: Resonance or Dissonance?
By Craig Johnson

Evaluating the Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Leadership Performance: Resonance or Dissonance?

In 1995 psychologist and journalist Daniel Goleman popularized the term "emotional intelligence (EI)" through his best selling book of the same name. Goleman wrote for an educational audience but was soon inundated with faxes, e-mails, letters, and calls from the business community. Executives, trainers and others wanted to know how the principles outlined in *Emotional Intelligence* could be applied in the workplace.

Goleman joined investigators from industry, business schools, and the federal government to form the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations. This group studies "star performers" in the workplace to determine what makes these individuals more effective than their colleagues with average track records (Goleman, 1998). Consortium investigators report that emotional intelligence (EQ), not cognitive intelligence (IQ), is the key to outstanding performance. High intelligence is required for entry into most professional and technical fields. When everyone falls within the same narrow IQ range, emotional abilities, like managing feelings and establishing good working relationships, set high achievers apart (Goleman, 1998). Emotional competencies account for twice as much of effective performance as IQ and expertise combined.

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The value of emotional intelligence increases with every step up the organizational ladder. Higher-level positions are generally more complex, involve more communication, and have a greater impact on collective performance. As a result, emotional competence is critical to top executives. They carry out sophisticated tasks that involve interaction with subordinates and other leaders while being responsible for the success of the entire organization. Highly effective executives demonstrate such emotional competencies as influence, team leadership, achievement drive, and self-confidence.

The Consortium's research into the link between emotional intelligence and leadership is summarized in *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). The emotional dimension of leadership is first or primal because a) leaders throughout history have served as emotional guides, and b) creating positive emotions remains the most important responsibility of leaders. Resonant leaders generate positive feelings in followers that enhance collective performance. Dissonant leaders create a negative emotional climate that undermines group effectiveness. Resonant leaders use leadership styles that are visionary, rely on coaching instead of coercion, build harmony, and value input and participation. They also know how to choose the right leadership style for the particular time and setting. Dissonant leaders set unrealistically high goals without providing emotional support and, at the same time, rely heavily on rules, threats and commands. In a technical note at the end of their book, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee cite data from 500 competence models to support their contention that EI has much more impact on leadership performance than intellect. They conclude: "our rule of thumb holds that EI contributes to 80 to 90 percent of the competencies that distinguish outstanding leaders from average leaders-and sometimes more" (p. 251).

Now that the Emotional Intelligence movement has crossed the border into the field of leadership studies, expect more research on emotional expression and regulation in leader-follower relationships, more discussion of emotional leadership competencies in leadership classrooms, and more consultants offering EI measurement and training programs. Determining how to respond to this surge of popular and academic interest is critical. In this article I will argue that those in the leadership community should reject claims that emotional intelligence is THE key to a leader's effectiveness. Such assertions strike a discordant note because they lack a solid conceptual and logical foundation. I will conclude by suggesting that leadership educators take a cautious approach to emotionally intelligent leadership, one that places the construct in a broader context and acknowledges the role of both emotion and cognition in leadership performance.

Definitional Discord

Doubting the Wisdom of Emotional Intelligence

Popular treatments of emotionally intelligent leadership give the impression that emotional intelligence is a widely accepted construct in the field of psychology. Nothing could be further from the truth. Controversy surrounding EI begins with debate over the concept's legitimacy. To meet the traditional definition of intelligence, emotional ability should consist of a distinct set of interrelated skills linked to brain function. These competencies must function independently of cognitive abilities and personality (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). While proponents of EI believe that the construct meets these standards, skeptics conclude that emotional intelligence is just another name for personality characteristics. Critics point to a series of studies conducted by Davies, Stankov and Roberts (1998) who administered emotional intelligence, personality, and cognitive measures to college students and military

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personnel. Davies and his colleagues found a high correlation between all three batteries of tests, which indicates that EI is an aspect of personality rather than a separate intelligence.

Other investigators reject the traditional definition of cognitive or "academic" intelligence and, by extension, any attempt to apply existing intelligence criteria to emotional ability. Psychometric measures treat intelligence as an individual trait that functions independently of the specific situation. Sternberg (Hedlund & Sternberg, 2000), Kihlstrom and Cantor (2000), and others believe that intelligence is context specific. To function effectively, actors must draw upon tacit knowledge derived through relevant experience. Sternberg and his colleagues study the behaviors people use to achieve such life tasks as making friends and getting good grades. Many of these "practical intelligence" abilities have an emotional component; i.e. expressing empathy, keeping one's anger under control, responding to another person's disappointment. From this perspective, emotional intelligence appears to be a subset of practical problem solving, not a stand-alone set of mental abilities.

A third group of scholars rejects emotional intelligence on the grounds that emotions are socially constructed. Situational constraints and cultural norms govern emotional meaning and expression. Shame, guilt, and embarrassment come from falling short of social expectations, for instance (Fischer & Tangney, 1995), and cultures define positive and negative emotions differently. Love is desirable in the US and Italy but is labeled as a negative feeling in China ("sad love"). American attempts to demonstrate friendliness are seen as shallow by many Japanese (Planalp, 1999). There are also cultural variations in whose emotions should be expressed. While Westerners express their own feelings, lower caste members of the Wolof tribe of Senegal transmit the emotional messages of the upper caste (Planalp, 1999).

Competing Conceptualizations

Debate over the legitimacy of emotional intelligence is just the beginning. Even those who embrace the concept clash over the range of skills and abilities that make up emotional intelligence. Scholars who hold a narrow view define EI as the ability to perceive and process emotional information, a competency that works in conjunction with IQ. Other investigators consider emotional intelligence to be "almost everything but IQ" that contributes to success in life (Hedlund & Sternberg, 2000).

Mayer and Salovey (1997) are the leading proponents of a limited definition of emotional intelligence. They treat EI as "thinking with a heart." This type of information processing takes emotions into account when making choices. Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. (p. 10).

The four sets of psychological processes that make up Mayer and Salovey's definition of emotional intelligence are outlined in Table 1. They are presented in ascending order of integration and complexity. The first or lowest branch emerges in infancy and consists of accuracy in perception, appraisal and expression of emotion. This ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others is the foundation for the next three skill sets. Branch two-emotional facilitation of feeling-allows individuals to access their feelings in order to better understand them, and to take advantage of moods to facilitate thought. Good moods contribute to creativity; bad moods encourage evaluation and focus more attention on details (Mayer, 1986; George, 2000). The third branch, understanding and analyzing emotions and employing

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emotional knowledge, involves such skills as labeling feelings as well as understanding mixed emotions and the transitions between emotions. The relationship between irritation and rage provides one example of emotional transitions. Irritation precedes rage but rage doesn't generally lead to irritation.

The fourth and final branch is the reflective regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. This set of psychological processes is based on consciously noting and controlling moods and feelings to increase personal effectiveness. At this highest level of emotional intelligence, actors think about their feelings and then decide whether to act to regulate their moods. Consider the case of an emotionally intelligent employee denied a promotion, for instance. She recognizes the danger of holding a grudge against her supervisor and company so decides to set new goals rather than dwell on her disappointment.

Table 1 **Mayer and Salovey Emotional Intelligence Framework**

Perception, appraisal, and expression of emotion

- *Ability to identify emotion in other people and objects.
- *Ability to express emotions accurately, and to express needs related to those feelings.
- *Ability to discriminate between accurate and inaccurate, or honest and dishonest, expressions of feelings.

Emotional facilitation of thinking

- *Ability to redirect and prioritize one's thinking based on the feelings associated with objects, events, and other people.
- *Ability to generate or emulate vivid emotions to facilitate judgments and memories concerning feelings.
- *Ability to capitalize on mood swings to take multiple points of view; ability to integrate these mood-induced perspectives.
- *Ability to use emotional states to facilitate problem solving and creativity.

Understanding and analyzing emotional information; employing emotional knowledge

- *Ability to understand how different emotions are related.
- *Ability to perceive the causes and consequences of feelings.
- *Ability to interpret complex feelings, such as emotional blends and contradictory feeling states.
- *Ability to understand and predict likely transitions between emotions.

Regulation of emotion

- *Ability to be open to feelings, both those that are pleasant and those that are unpleasant.
- *Ability to monitor and reflect on emotions.
- *Ability to engage, prolong, or detach from an emotional state, depending upon

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its judged informativeness or utility.
 *Ability to manage emotion in oneself and others.

[Go to Source Table 1](#)

In contrast to Mayer and Salovey, Goleman and his colleagues (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2001) offer a very broad definition of EI, one that combines individual or self-competencies with social or relational skills and traits (see Table 2). In their conceptualization of EI, *emotional self-awareness* is the ability to recognize and accurately assess one's emotional state and to act with self-confidence (Goleman, 2001). *Emotional self-management* is a cluster of abilities that includes overcoming the distressing effects of negative emotions like fear and anger; managing impulses; acting in a consistent, trustworthy fashion; and channeling emotions to motivate goal achievement. *Social awareness* encompasses empathy, a service orientation, and an understanding the political realities of organizational life. *Relationship management* builds on the first three domains, combining self-control, management of emotions, and social sensitivity to influence the emotions of others.

Table 2

Emotional Intelligence Leadership

Self-Awareness

emotional self-awareness
 accurate self-assessment
 self-confidence

Competencies

Self-Management

self-control
 transparency (authentic openness)
 adaptability
 achievement
 initiative
 optimism

Social Awareness

empathy
 organizational awareness
 service

Relationship Management

inspiration
 influence
 developing others
 change catalyst
 conflict management
 teamwork and collaboration

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Emotionally Intelligent Leadership: Finding Resonance in Dissonance

The controversy and confusion surrounding the emotional intelligence construct should serve as a warning to leadership practitioners and scholars. Claims that EI is the key to effective leadership rest on a shaky conceptual foundation. A definitive link between EI and leadership performance cannot be established since there is no consensus about the existence or definition of emotional intelligence. Even more troubling is the fact that those who attempt to establish such a causal connection adopt the broad view of EI. Many of the primal leadership competencies identified by Consortium researchers seem to fall outside the domain of intelligence. Transparency or integrity is a character trait demonstrated through consistent behavior, not a psychological ability as advocates claim. Relationship management competencies (influence, developing others, conflict management, building bonds, teamwork) are learned skill sets that involve cognitive as well as emotional abilities. For example, successful influence requires analytical and reasoning skills in addition to managing feelings.

The "everything but IQ" approach to emotionally intelligent leadership makes it nearly impossible to disprove the assertion that 80-90% of a leader's success rests upon her or his emotional ability. If EI is everything but cognitive intelligence, then it seems logical to assume that all skills and abilities beyond IQ contribute more to a leader's success than mental ability. Self-confidence, integrity, inspirational leadership, persuasion, collaboration, and interpersonal communication all appear to be more important to leaders than cognitive ability alone. EI proponents also offer a circular argument by listing inspirational leadership as an emotional competency essential to effective leadership. They appear to be saying that highly effective leaders are those who engage in a highly effective leadership behavior-creating an inspiring vision.

Clearly, efforts to extend emotional intelligence to the leadership arena are faced with serious obstacles. These conceptual and logical difficulties do not mean that leadership practitioners and scholars should avoid the topic, however. Emotional considerations have longed occupied a central place in leadership studies. Feelings play an important role in such leadership tasks as motivating, decision making, developing interpersonal relationships, and shaping organizational culture (George, 2000). Further, ignoring primal leadership does not mean that the EI movement will go away. Students of leadership will be exposed to claims that emotional intelligence is the key to their success. They need to hear about the limitations of emotionally intelligent leadership and to come to their own conclusions about the merits of this approach. Instructors and trainers should incorporate material on emotional recognition, expression, and management into classes and workshops. They should do so with caution, though, in a way that resonates with new understandings of role of emotions in organizations and the state of EI theory. To this end:

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Place EI in a broader context. Interest in emotionally intelligent leadership appears to be part of a larger trend that rejects the cognitive bias of organizational theory and practice. Management texts and workshops have traditionally urged leaders to base their decisions on logic and reason, not feelings. The vast majority of large US and Canadian organizations are bureaucracies which follow standardized rules and procedures designed to minimize the role of emotions (Putnam & Mumby, 1993). Negative emotions like anger and anxiety are feared or suppressed at work. Positive feelings are valued in so far as they serve organizational objectives, or can be channeled into emotional performances or labor designed to sell goods and services (Hochschild, 1983).

Instead of dismissing emotion, a growing number of scholars believe that emotions are a central feature of organizational life (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Zerbe, 2000; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Mumby & Putnam, 1993). These researchers view organizations as emotional, not rational, arenas. Some feminist organizations like The Body Shop make the expression and acknowledgement of emotion a central value (Martin, Knopoff & Beckman, 1998). Despite its flaws, the emotional intelligence construct can be a useful tool for introducing the topic of emotions into the leadership classroom or training program. Broader dialogue about the importance of emotions in organizational and group settings can come out of discussion of emotionally intelligent leadership.

Acknowledge the controversy. Present competing definitions of emotional intelligence as well as a variety of competency lists. Explore commonalities and differences; encourage participants to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. At this point in time, a restricted definition of EI, one that emphasizes the importance of thought and feeling, is most defensible. Leaders need to utilize BOTH cognitive and emotional abilities to succeed. Alert students and trainees to the theoretical and logical weaknesses of claiming that emotional intelligence is the primary factor in leadership success.

Be alert for cultural bias. Popular conceptions of EI are clearly products of Western society. They rest on a number of individualistic assumptions, including the belief that individuals own, control and express their own emotions. Negative and positive feelings are often based on individual performance, such as experiencing pride when standing out from the rest of one's peers or shame when failing to achieve. These assumptions do not translate well into collectivist settings. In collectivist societies feelings are less self-centered. Emotions are generated by connection with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). How a person feels is the product of his or her relationship with the in-group and humility and modesty are often desirable emotional states. Leadership consultants and educators should therefore resist the temptation to export emotional intelligence training as currently formulated to other cultural settings.

Conclusion

Rejecting claims that emotional intelligence accounts for superior leadership performance is not likely to win many friends among EI proponents or their followers. Yet, to accept such assertions would undermine the credibility of the field of leadership studies. Leadership educators and practitioners should welcome Goleman and his colleagues to the discipline but forcefully point out that primal leadership is no panacea. However, by working together, emotional intelligence researchers and leadership scholars can develop a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between emotions and leadership effectiveness.

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