

Leadership 101

Column 3: Leadership and emotional intelligence

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Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer were among the first researchers to coin the term “emotional intelligence” in 1990 [1]. The abstract of their seminal article defines the concept as “a set of skills hypothesized to contribute 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.” The concept of EI or EQ, as it is abbreviated, became more widely known following the publication of Daniel Goleman’s best-selling 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* [2]. EI is now firmly entrenched in the literature of business, human resources, and education, among other fields.

Mayer, a professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, further outlines his “four branch model of emotional intelligence” with the four “branches” being the ability to (i) accurately perceive emotions in oneself and others, (ii) use emotions to facilitate thinking, (iii) understand emotional meanings, and (iv) manage emotions [3].

Many writers and researchers have posited varying definitions of EI and its components. Mayer refers to these as “mixed models” of emotional intelligence [4]. Other writers caution against confusing EI with having good social skills. Adele Lynn points out that EI is largely focused on an individual’s internal world, while social skills have to do with external relations [5]. Good social skills are part of having emotional intelligence but do not constitute it. Lynn provides a model of EI that includes five competencies for emotional intelligence:

- (1) Self-awareness and self control
- (2) Empathy
- (3) Social expertness
- (4) Personal influence
- (5) Mastery of purpose and vision [6]

It isn’t hard to see how these qualities relate to being an effective leader. They are among the qualities that distinguish a person who leads merely by being in charge or having authority, from a truly effective or inspirational leader. Indeed, Goleman continues to write extensively about EI both through books and online, notably on its relationship to leadership:

Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions. No matter what leaders set out to do—whether it’s creating strategy or mobilizing teams to action—their success depends on how they do it. Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should [7].

In the library literature, Peter Herson, a faculty member at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, has written extensively on leadership. Together with his colleague Nancy Rossiter, he undertook research on the subject of EI and its relationship to library leadership in 2006 [8]. Using five qualities of a mixed model of EI (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill), they analyzed job advertisements for academic library directors and surveyed a number of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library directors to determine which of these qualities were sought in new hires and which ones current directors value most. In addition, they interviewed eight of the ARL directors for more in-depth input on the subject. The analysis of the job advertisements revealed some aspects of EI being required for these leadership positions, but the language of the ads required interpretation to reach that determination.

The survey results and comments from the academic library directors are very interesting and reveal the value these librarians place on both emotional intelligence and other leadership qualities. The results are too lengthy to fully summarize here, but the following are some of the traits, as defined by the authors, within the five EI qualities that were ranked most highly by the ARL directors.

Self-awareness

- Cognitive ability to deal with complex scenarios/situations
- Realistic understanding of oneself—emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives
- Know where he or she is going, taking the organization
- Sense of humour
- Respect individuality and diversity

Self-regulation

- Stable temperament and ability to maintain an emotional balance under constant tensions
- Integrity
- Comfortable in making judgment calls
- Comfortable with ambiguity
- Flexible in adapting to change or overcoming obstacles
- Skill at diagnostic, strategic, and tactical reasoning

Motivation

- Visionary—able to build a shared vision and rally others around it
- Motivate people to develop and adhere to a shared vision
- Commitment to job, organization, institution, and profession
- Articulate direction for the library
- Optimism, even in the face of failure

Empathy

- Treat people with dignity and respect
- Attract, build, and retain talent
- Good interpersonal/people skills
- Keep organization focused on high-quality service
- Exercise good judgment
- Good listener

Social skill

- Ability to function in a political environment
- Effective in leading change
- Develop and foster partnerships
- Collaborative
- Build rapport with a wide circle of people
- Resonance—inspiring people to work together to solve problems, inspiring excellence [9]

These traits are ones that we would wish our leaders to have, but it is a tall order to expect any one individual to have all of these characteristics in abundance. They are, however, qualities that everyone can work on developing, along with other qualities that are typically associated with leadership, such as professional competence, risk-taking, decisiveness, and curiosity.

This brings to mind the age-old question: are leaders born or made? Is it possible to develop leadership skills? The vast number of leadership courses, articles, institutes, and workshops on the topic would suggest it is possible for people with the interest and drive to pursue it. Having some innate leadership ability clearly would help in this endeavour and may, in fact, be required.

Similarly, the question can be posed: is it possible to develop emotional intelligence? Because so much of EI is related to one's innate, personal qualities, this question would seem harder to answer in the affirmative. Some of the highly valued traits Hernon and Rossiter identify, such as developing partnerships or articulating a direction for the library, likely can be cultivated. On the other hand, can empathy truly be developed in a person who lacks that quality? That's a question for psychiatrists!

References

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