

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE:

What is it? How can we use it?

By James Anderson

The concept of Emotional Intelligence first came to prominence within the business community following the 1998 Harvard Business Review article What Makes A Leader? by Daniel Goleman. This article received the highest reader ratings and reprint requests in the history of the Harvard Business Review. Interest in Emotional Intelligence was unprecedented.

Emotional Intelligence has since become regarded as one of the hottest topics in the search for differentiators predicting superior leadership abilities and workplace performance. The resulting commercial interest in the use of Emotional Intelligence within organisational settings in Australia is on the rise dramatically. This is witnessed by the fact that the Australian Psychological Society's College of Organisational Psychologists was overwhelmed by the exceptionally large attendance at its recent seminar on Emotional Intelligence. With interest in the concept growing, so too is interest in how it can be effectively utilised by organisations and industry.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Goleman's 1995 and 1998 literary works further explained the concept of Emotional Intelligence. In *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ for Character, Health and Lifelong Achievement*, Goleman related how empathy and communication skills, as well as social and leadership skills, are strong determining factors contributing to one's success in life. Essentially, Emotional Intelligence refers to how we are able to perceive, identify, understand, learn from and manage both our own emotions and the emotional states of others in a way that facilitates our social interactions.

Why is this relevant to business?

One of the factors that made Goleman's collection of ideas on Emotional Intelligence particularly popular was his elaboration on how such a concept could be utilised by businesses. For many decades, General Mental Ability (GMA) has been accepted as one of the strongest predictors of job success.

The predictive validity of GMA is reflected by the fact that measures of 'intelligence', GMA or IQ (all are very similarly defined) are found almost ubiquitously amongst psychological test batteries used for recruitment situations. However, despite its comparatively good predictive validity, a great deal of job success still remains unexplained by GMA. For quite some time, organisations, psychologists and business experts have been searching for the factors that would provide more valid predictions of job success.

Managers, experts and psychologists have all known for some time that organisations are often defined by much more than intellectual ability, or qualities simply defined within traditional measures of work performance. These intangible factors support a 'Gestalt view' of organisations: the whole is more than simply the sum of its parts. It is often the relationships between people, and the way people relate to

the inherent requirements of a job role, that can make the difference between functional and underperforming organisations. How a manager understands the pressures on workers and how a frontline employee is able to ascertain the needs and feelings of a customer can largely determine their abilities to facilitate effective outcomes for the organisation.

Using Emotional Intelligence and testing for it.

The strong interest in Emotional Intelligence has prompted several attempts to measure and quantify it, in order to allow predictive inferences of an individual's likely future behaviour to be drawn. Understanding, through a valid testing procedure, how an individual might be likely to respond to an upset customer or an employee going through a grieving process would help circumvent the reliance on the sometimes unreliable perceptions gathered through employment interviews. In such interviews, candidates can be very conscious of creating a good, if perhaps slightly inaccurate, impression and as such may manipulate their answers to interview questions accordingly. Hence the value of a more indicative and objective measure of this 'emotionally intelligent' behaviour becomes apparent.

In addition to simply 'testing' for Emotional Intelligence, even greater interest has been centred on the benefits of coaching employees on Emotional Intelligence. While seen by some as being somewhat a stable trait, Emotional Intelligence is also reminiscent of a skill in that it can be practised, refined, and developed - perhaps most principally by firstly drawing attention to both its existence and its importance. By coaching or training employees and executives on its worth, not only does an organisation provide the opportunity for development of Emotional Intelligence, but it also shows the value it places on the behaviours encapsulated in the concept. Enshrining such



“pathways
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growth”



behaviours within an organisation's culture can be seen as a pragmatic way to effect positive change toward a more sensitive organisation, in tune with its employees as well as its customers. The 'self-aware' organisation is able to better manage its responses towards both groups, providing the means for optimal performance.

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**OK great, we've found the "Holy Grail" for business!
Umm...haven't we?**

There is no doubt Emotional Intelligence is proving to be a tool greeted by the business community with a great degree of interest and even fervour. But how great is the gap between a fantastic theory and something we can really use? Certainly the adoption of policies, practices, training and management styles paying due attention to the concept of Emotional Intelligence is providing benefits to a great number of organisations, nationally and internationally. Many leading organisations are taking time to examine and find ways in which to put into practice the ideas that Goleman so ardently espoused. Australia Post is an example of one of our nation's biggest organisations implementing programs to utilise Emotional Intelligence.

However, one of the greatest challenges remains the formulation of testing procedures that accurately assess Emotional Intelligence. Current tests have been shown to have only moderate predictive validity in terms of job success or leadership ability, and have been somewhat hampered by questions of how accurately they assess 'real world' Emotional Intelligence.

Within such tests can be found questions regarding the emotional content of pieces of art or natural scenery, and many other questions requiring subjective judgement. A further criticism of such tests is that they do not test one's actual ability to manage emotions in 'emotionally charged' environments, where

Emotional Intelligence is perhaps most needed. There has also been debate as to whether a population consensus opinion or an expert opinion is a better comparison measure to determine what is a 'correct' interpretation of an emotional state.

If we presume that the population follows a similar distribution on Emotional Intelligence as it does on 'regular' intelligence or GMA, we would consider that most people would not have superior levels of Emotional Intelligence; therefore they will 'get it wrong' at least some of the time. This poses the question whether consensus opinion should be used where most people might agree on an 'incorrect' interpretation of an individual's feelings.

Or, is 'getting it wrong' a sign that you are in tune with how most people would perceive a situation or feel in a similar situation? Could the individual displaying the emotion be displaying an inappropriate response compared to that which might be considered normal? How do we know what an individual is feeling from merely a picture or short description if we do not have full background details or a 'baseline' of behaviour with which to compare?

Certainly the unique factors that separate individuals in regard to how we feel, what we value and how we express our emotions are as important to note in assessing a person's emotional state as any generic measures presented in a test format.

Moving forward.

While perhaps currently an imperfect science, like many attempts to measure humans, Emotional Intelligence is still of value to us in the context of both individuals and organisations. We can learn much from the current knowledge on the topic and from the ongoing research into its benefits, limitations and uses. As time progresses, so too will our refinement of knowledge in the area, leading to better ways to test, assess and utilise the value of Emotional Intelligence.

It remains that becoming aware of the power of Emotional Intelligence in interpersonal and organisational situations provides a great means for your organisation to develop a culture that better understands itself, its customers, and the relationships between the two.

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A Postscript

'EI' is perhaps a rebranding or more focused analysis of what we have known for ages - the importance of the 'soft skills' in management and leadership. Consequently, the development of reliable 'EI' measures may assist individuals and organisations to better assess and develop skills in this area.

“building long - standing partnerships”

VIEWPOINT

While definitions may vary about what 'emotional intelligence' really is, and despite debate remaining about the validity and reliability of assessing an individual's emotional intelligence, the concept remains an important one for helping managers to get the most out of their people.

When we think of all the emotions we experience at work including satisfaction, frustration, happiness, disappointment, pride and even envy, it is easy to recognise that these are not only by-products of work outcomes, but they also impact upon the outcomes themselves. Being able to understand and manage these emotions provides us with significant advantages in being able to enhance working relationships, drive work performance and recognise those emotional responses inhibiting performance.

We commonly hear from high calibre candidates that they look for a manager with whom they feel comfortable and can freely communicate. They want to work with teams that have that edge where they can discuss contentious issues comprehensively without destructive influences; where they complement each others' work by intuitively concerning themselves with the needs of others; and where they are able to harness the positives as a general way of working.

The importance of having a strong degree of awareness of the impact of emotions upon team dynamics is obvious and has a significant bearing on how much employees are willing to contribute, how committed they will be to the organisation, how they will react to others and how long they will stay at the organisation. With retention such a key issue today, EI needs to be taken very seriously.



Philip Archer

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“flow with a
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