

HOW TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI) AT WORK

© Jeannine Ouellette, M.A.
Director of Content Development and Workshop Design
Eksento Inc.

What does it mean to be emotionally intelligent?

According to Daniel Goleman, author of *Working With Emotional Intelligence* (1998), EI is a combination of five competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy and social relationships. In other words, emotional intelligence is the ability to sense what is going on in a situation, to know how we feel while we are in that situation, to be able to assess and take into account other people's thoughts and feelings accurately and to respond appropriately.

To reach success in all life and work endeavors, emotional intelligence, also called Emotional Quotient (EQ), is as important as IQ, yet it is frequently dismissed as being "all fluff", often by individuals who tend to be disconnected from their own emotions, and therefore, don't perceive any added value to this intelligent source of information.

The truth of the matter is that every environment, whether it is social, family or work related, involves human beings, and human beings are emotional beings. It is simply the way we are wired – all incoming data pass through the limbic region of our brain where they are instantly analyzed for their emotional value before going to the cerebral cortex for processing. Therefore, our brain is structured in such a way that we experience the emotion before we formulate an accompanying thought. When infants are born, they communicate their needs almost exclusively through their emotional language. They can "tell" us how they feel although they have not yet acquired language. As we mature toward adulthood, we don't lose this first language, but we do learn to suppress and invalidate it. It's just a feeling, we tell ourselves...

Emotional Intelligence at Work

Every aspect of our work life is linked to emotional intelligence – respect in the workplace, interpersonal assertion, empathy, decision making, motivation and drive, stress management, adaptability to change, communication, conflict resolution, team building, coaching, leadership, customer service and even time management. By being more aware and knowledgeable of our emotional reactions at work, we

automatically increase our power of choice. Choice comes from knowledge. If we don't know what we are feeling or why we are feeling it, how can we change it or have control over it? We must first know what "it" is!

Improving EQ skills – Where to begin?

Begin with the very first step — raise your immediate level of awareness. For example, if you're feeling a sense of panic or anger in a work situation, be fully aware of your emotional state as you are experiencing it. With this self-knowledge, you will be able to bring your feelings under control (i.e., not let yourself be overwhelmed by the emotion) and you will have the choice to channel your feelings into productive behaviors aimed at resolution, decision making and problem solving.

Raise your ability to "read" emotions. While you are in a situation, take the extra moment to assess what you are feeling or what another person may be feeling. An emotion is too important to dismiss whether it is your own emotion or that of a co-worker. Emotions provide vital information that will remain invisible if you don't really pay attention.

Develop the habit of monitoring your emotions from moment to moment. The idea is not to become obsessed and spend all your time on self-reflection and analysis. The idea is to become more comfortable at tuning in to every source of information present in a work situation by taking into account both external and internal cues.

Improve your ability to handle change, contradictions, ambiguity, stress, errors, etc. Self-regulation of emotions usually relates to feelings that upset and distress us. These are the feelings that can get in the way of making sound decisions, handling a conflict appropriately and effectively, or communicating a delicate aspect of a performance evaluation.

Practice delaying gratification and managing impulsiveness. We all need positive feedback and encouragement about our work yet when it is absent or insufficient, we must be able to rely on our own capacity for self-validation in order to stay motivated and continue to give our best at work. Also, when we act impulsively, our judgment may be clouded and we may say something hurtful to a co-worker or make a decision that we soon regret. Remembering that emotions precede thought, it is a good idea to slow down our reaction time long enough to become aware of what we are feeling in the situation. By

doing so, we may realize that what we were about to say or do was not the right thing at the right time.

Practice attentive listening. In working with others, listening is an integral part of conflict resolution strategies. We sometimes push with our words when it would be more appropriate to pull back and allow some room for exploration and input from others. Emotional intelligence is about appropriate response. It is sometimes more appropriate to listen than speak.

Strive for social competence. It doesn't matter if you're in a leadership position at work or not, you are a "leader in life" and however you choose to act, respond, listen, empathize, communicate, etc. in your work environment, you are a model of professional ethics for anyone who is sharing your workspace.

Emotional intelligence is more than a set of skills or competencies. It is a learned ability to identify, experience, understand and express human emotions in healthy and productive ways. A higher EQ benefits work, relationships and health. Higher emotional intelligence improves services to your clientele, promotes diversity of ideas among individuals in your workplace, increases your coping skills in times of transformation, builds teams that are more respectful, effective and focused, prevents inappropriate behavior that could lead to conflict, develops your leadership/coaching skills and also supports your ability to learn since managed emotions give you better access to your IQ. Emotional intelligence promotes self-accountability and a strong belief system anchored in human values. In that sense, emotional intelligence is a way of life.