

Emotional Intelligence Is Key to Outstanding Leadership

Learn to understand how emotions drive your own and others' behavior.

By Dori Meinert | Feb 23, 2018

If you're a leader, you probably already have the time-honored "business smarts" for the job, namely the intellectual capability and technical skill.

Those are important. But they're only the base line. Numerous studies have shown that what distinguishes outstanding leaders from average ones are emotional self-awareness and self-control.

"Effective leaders tend to be smart in the traditional way, but there's also this emotional component that's probably equally important, if not more so," says Cary Cherniss, professor emeritus of organizational psychology and co-chair of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (<http://www.eiconsortium.org/index.html>) at Rutgers University.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand your own and others' emotions and how they drive behavior, and then using that knowledge to motivate others.

"Most people make mistakes around emotional intelligence because they don't understand what's going on with other people," says Travis Bradberry, president of TalentSmart (<http://www.talentsmart.com/>) in San Diego, which provides emotional intelligence tests and training. "They don't even necessarily understand what's going on with themselves."

In assessments of more than 2 million workers, TalentSmart researchers found that "just 36 percent of people are able to accurately identify their emotions as they happen," says Bradberry, author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* (<http://amzn.to/2Er3jgF>) (TalentSmart, 2009).

A lack of emotional intelligence among the senior team can be devastating to the rest of the workforce.

"Leaders prime the emotional state of the organization," Bradberry says. "So when they're ineffective, when they set poor examples of how they treat other people, that trickles down throughout the company." The result could be low employee engagement or high turnover because of the toxic (www.shrm.org) interactions between people.

"It's very hard on morale, and you start to lose that discretionary effort that you get from people who love their jobs and work in motivating, comfortable environments," he says.

One telltale sign of leaders who need to work on managing their emotions is that they frequently have challenging interactions with others.

"They find people very difficult, and they don't tend to understand that they are part of the equation," Bradberry says.

On the other hand, leaders with high emotional intelligence "tend to be uplifted by their interactions with people and think it's great to have a team," he says.

The good news is you can improve your emotional intelligence, if you're willing to work at it.

"It's really critical for somebody who wants to excel as a manager and leader that they look at developing these skills. And by the way, they *can* be learned," says Annie McKee, (<http://scholar.gse.upenn.edu/mckee>) a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's graduate school of education who teaches leadership and emotional intelligence and is co-author of *Becoming a Resonant Leader* (<http://amzn.to/2F1HuRW>) (Harvard Business Review Press, 2008).

McKee and fellow researchers have identified the following four key elements of emotional intelligence:

Self-Awareness

Frequently, leaders don't see a need to control their emotions because they've reached their lofty position without doing so—and their teams are afraid to clue them in.

A 360-degree feedback process can help pinpoint problem areas. The assessment, which uses input from supervisors, colleagues and subordinates, is often eye-opening.

A more low-profile approach is to simply ask trusted colleagues.

"It's good for all leaders to get some honest feedback," says Cherniss, noting that some companies are requiring executives to focus on emotional intelligence as part of their leadership development programs.

Social Awareness

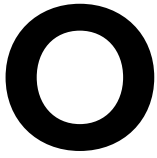
People without this skill don't understand that, in social interactions, they need to focus more on the other person than themselves. They miss important cues because they're always thinking about what they will say next.

Those prompts can be particularly subtle with subordinates, who often defer to authority and may be reluctant to share what's on their mind directly. Learning to read nonverbal signals can provide clues about what they're feeling, Bradberry advises.

Ask team members from time to time how they're feeling about a particular project, suggests Joshua Freedman, the San Francisco-based CEO of 6 Seconds (<http://www.6seconds.org/>), a global nonprofit researching and sharing best practices for emotional intelligence. Just the act of acknowledging their stress can help them feel better, he says.

{*SHRM members-only toolkit: Developing Organizational Leaders*} (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/developingorganizationalleaders.aspx)

Self-Management



nce you've determined which areas to work on, focus on achieving one or two goals.

“Self-management is getting your emotions to produce the behavior you want,” Bradberry says. “Sometimes that’s keeping yourself from doing something. Other times it’s magnifying a productive behavior.”

Here are some tips from the experts:

Set narrow, measurable goals. It could be as simple as giving your undivided attention to someone who walks into your office or as difficult as eliminating habitual angry outbursts.

Keep a journal. Stop several times a day and jot down what you’re feeling and why, McKee advises. “Am I angry because that person just snapped at me and I feel my job is on the line? Maybe it’s not because he hates you. It could be he’s having a bad day,” she says.

Quiz yourself. In larger companies, executives may have the opportunity to work with a coach who can help them to recognize the emotions they are feeling and to use them in more-productive ways.

“Sadness, anger and fear are signals to help us inform our actions,” says Shawn Kent Hayashi, an executive coach, a consultant and CEO of The Professional Development Group (<http://theprofessionaldevelopmentgroup.com/>) in Center Valley, Pa.

‘That 20-second pause that engages your thinking brain instead of your out-of-control emotional brain is all it takes to be more effective.’

She teaches clients questions to ask themselves to analyze their feelings. For example, a leader prone to lashing out might ask questions such as: “What crossed my boundaries? Who do I need to talk to to clean up this situation? Am I the one who didn’t meet my own standards?”

Dig beneath the surface because sometimes hidden emotions are driving our behavior, Freedman says.

Pause and reflect. Before reacting, take a deep breath and think about what’s really going on with both you and the other person.

“That 20-second pause that engages your thinking brain instead of your out-of-control emotional brain is all it takes to be more effective,” McKee says.

Find an outlet. When you feel like exploding, let off steam with a trusted friend instead. “It’s venting with a purpose, venting with the intention of learning something,” McKee explains.

Psych yourself up. “Other people pick up on the leader’s mood, so having a positive outlook and communicating with people can really pull a team along in doing outstanding work,” says Geri Grossman, president of My Executive Coach (<http://www.myexecutivecoach.com/>) in Buffalo, N.Y.

Practice. Replacing destructive habits with productive ones takes a lot of time and effort. Realize that it won’t happen overnight.

Relationship Management

Use your new insights to inspire your workforce. Researchers have found that “outstanding leaders almost continuously monitor the emotional climate in any setting where they are,” Cherniss says.

They can walk into a room and lift people up. “They’re very good in the way they interact with people, in the way they express their own feelings and getting other people to feel good even if the situation is a difficult one,” he says. “They give them a sense of hope and commitment to the goal.”

That’s true genius.

Dori Meinert is senior writer/editor of HR Magazine.

Was this article useful? SHRM offers thousands of tools, templates and other exclusive member benefits, including compliance updates, sample policies, HR expert advice, education discounts, a growing online member community and much more. Join/Renew Now (www.shrm.org/) and let SHRM help you work smarter.

Contact Us (www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Contact-Us.aspx) | 800.283.SHRM (7476)

© 2018 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

We use cookies to improve your browsing experience on our website, and we use our own, as well as third party cookies, to display advertising for products and services we believe may be of interest to you. By closing the message or continuing to browse this site, you agree to the use of cookies in accordance with our [Cookie Policy](http://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer).

