

**GET OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY –
USING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
TO BECOME A PERSONAL AND
PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS**

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The Emotional Un-intelligentsia

Sam sat down at the big conference table and began organizing her documents across the large table in preparation for the big meeting. She was nervous because her boss had sent her an email only 24 hours prior demanding detailed statistics and reports regarding an upcoming project. She had stayed up almost all night working on it and was increasingly convinced the project needed to move in a different direction than the one they had been discussing. She was eager to explain this need to her boss, someone whose success she admired.

Her boss was 15 minutes late. Sam didn't mind. She knew her boss was very busy and probably had a good reason to be late. As soon as Sam began to explain the first findings in one of her reports, her boss cut her off and said, "we really don't need that data right now. Just tell me about the bottom line." Sam stammered and tried to recover from being derailed from her planned presentation. Sam struggled to respond to the boss' request while also trying to explain her reasons for believing that the project might be off course. The boss cut her off once again, stood up and said, "You know what? I'm just going to give this project to Alex. I really shouldn't have troubled you with it, Sam, you've already got more going on than you can handle. Just give all your work to Alex and I'll follow up later." Sam shot back, "That's fine. Give it to Alex. Alex is overwhelmed with work and this project is going to be a total failure. I hope you like failure!" and stormed out of the room.

Similar small-scale explosions occur across the working world on a daily basis regardless of how those involved really feel about each other. Channels of communication are cut and people don't know how to re-engage with each other. Feelings are bruised and may never properly be repaired. Professionals simmer for a while until one day something inside snaps and an explosion occurs, often resulting in harsh words and sometimes even a termination. We tend to carry these issues home and take them out on our families. This is only one example of the many ways poor emotional intelligence undermines our company's profitability and our personal satisfaction in our work, as well as our ability to contribute meaningfully at home. Like all of us, both Sam and her boss could use a crash course in Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence Defined

Emotional Intelligence (EI) encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviors which can be divided into four sub-categories: Self-Awareness and Self-Management which make up one's "Personal Competence;" and Social Awareness and Relationship Management, which make up one's "Social Competence."¹

The authors of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* describe these categories as follows:

Personal competence is made up of your self-awareness and self-management skills, which focus more on you individually than on your interactions with other people. Personal competence is your ability to stay aware of your emotions and manage your behavior and tendencies. Social competence is made up of your social awareness and relationship management skills; social competence is your

¹ Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, (San Diego: Talent Smart, 2009), 23-24.

ability to understand other people’s moods, behavior and motives in order to improve the quality of your relationships.²

Further developing these thoughts, in *Emotional Intelligence: Science & Myth*, Gerald Matthews, Moshe Zeidner, and Richard D. Roberts define these categories in the following way:

Self-awareness = emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence.

Self-regulation = self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, and innovation.

Social skills = influence, communication, conflict management, leadership, change catalyst, building bonds, collaboration and cooperation, and team capabilities.³

When applied to organizational leadership, EI takes on an even more complex meaning. Emotionally Intelligent organizational leadership involves, “driving the collective emotions in a positive direction and clearing the smog created by toxic emotions. This task applies to leadership everywhere, from the boardroom to the shop floor.”⁴

“That’s just the way I am”

Over the years, we have heard many people say “That’s just the way I am!” Usually, that statement occurs after someone has been hurt or diminished in some way, and the person making that statement is attempting to explain his or her behavior. Our impression is that that person has some degree of self-awareness, but has not yet moved to the next critical stage in this process – self-management, which is sometimes referred to as self-regulation. Without moving through the different stages, we remain stuck in unproductive behavior patterns and will never be able to lead ourselves or our organizations to a higher EI ethos.

Daniel Goleman succinctly addresses self-mastery and self-management:

These are the basis for self-mastery: awareness of our internal states, and management of those states. These domains of skill are what make someone an outstanding individual performer in any domain of performance – and in business an outstanding individual contributor, or lone star. Competencies like managing emotions, focused drive to achieve goals, adaptability and initiative are based on emotional self-management.⁵

Defining Emotional Intelligence is one thing, but increasing it is quite another. People love to analyze themselves, to take personality profile quizzes, and to decide what they really want out of life, but they rarely factor in whether or not those quizzes or dreams require them to make any personal changes. Many people assume that their Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management are intrinsically tied to who they are as a person and therefore, immutable.

² Bradberry and Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 23-24

³ Gerald Matthews, Moshe Zeidner, and Richard D. Roberts, *Emotional Intelligence: Science and Myth*. Cambridge (MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 214.

⁴ Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee, and Richard E. Boyatzis, *Primal Leadership: Realizing The Power Of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2002), 169-248. Goleman, McKee, and Boyatzis, *Primal Leadership*, 5.

⁵ Daniel Goleman, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*, (Florence, MA: More Than Sound, LLC, 2011, Kindle Edition), 258.

However, there is good news. Studies have shown that we can improve our EI. Organizational Psychologist Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic writes that while your EI is “firm,” it is not “rigid.”⁶ However, with a sobering dose of reality, he goes on to say, “Our ability to identify and manage our own and others’ emotions is fairly stable over time, influenced by our early childhood experiences and even genetics. That does not mean we cannot change it, but, realistically, long-term improvements will require a great deal of dedication and guidance.”⁷

Author and leading EI expert Travis Bradberry advocates that work to improve one’s EI be undertaken on “one skill at a time” and has found that most people will begin seeing “measurable, enduring changes three to six months after they begin working on a skill.”⁸ Patience is a key component in this journey.⁹

Facing the truth about who you are can at times be unsettling. Getting in touch with your emotions and tendencies takes honesty and courage. Be patient and give yourself credit for even the smallest bits of forward momentum. As you start noticing things about yourself that you weren’t previously aware of (things you aren’t always going to like), you are progressing.¹⁰

Over the years, in addressing personal EI and in training others, we have determined that the key factors for a growing and healthy EI are humility, self-initiative, dedication, and personal investment. We cannot force individuals and organizations to grow in EI – they have to want to do it themselves. The starting place is a personal decision to engage on this topic and that you want to lead your organization and your family or friendship circle on this journey with you.

The Painful Process of Seeing Yourself

The first building block in increasing one’s emotional intelligence is Self-Awareness. One must explore one’s own behavior and learn to recognize it before undertaking the challenge of managing it. However, due to a lifetime of personal coping strategies, we cannot truly and clearly see ourselves as others do. We need feedback from others in order to most accurately be aware of ourselves. Chamorro-Premuzic explains,

We may not have a very accurate idea of how smart we are, but our notion of how nice we are is even less accurate. The main reason for this blind spot is wishful thinking or overconfidence: it is a well-documented (but rarely discussed) fact that, in any domain of competence, most people think they are better than they actually are. Thus any intervention focused on increasing [EI] must begin by helping people understand what their real strengths and weaknesses are.¹¹

⁶ Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, “Can You Really Improve Your Emotional Intelligence?” Harvard Business Review Blog Network, entry posted May 29, 2013. <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/05/can-you-really-improve-your-em/> (March 23, 2013).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bradberry and Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 55

⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, “Can You Really Improve Your Emotional Intelligence?” Harvard Business Review Blog Network, entry posted May 29, 2013. <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/05/can-you-really-improve-your-em/> (March 23, 2013).

This area of “Blind Spots,” which Chamarro-Premuzic referenced, is critical to our self-understanding. In her book *Fearless Leadership*, Loretta Malandro agrees:

Let’s not kid ourselves. Blind spots are the root causes of some of the most severe breakdowns faced by leaders, organizations, and societies. [...]Everyone suffers when leaders are not awake to their blind spots. The work environment becomes lackluster and pessimistic. People spend more time talking about what is not working, than working. Productivity and performance drop. And mistakes and breakdowns are quietly covered up instead of openly discussed and resolved. No one takes accountability, but everyone freely hands out blame. An entire enterprise becomes focused on looking good instead of being effective.¹²

We are blind to our Blind Spots due to what Kegan and LeHay describe as “The Big Assumptions.” These assumptions are basic beliefs we hold about the world as though they are “incontrovertible facts,” rather than, more realistically, as our perception of the world around us. “They may well be true,” explain Kegan and LeHay, “but they also may not be. When we treat an assumption as if it is a truth, we have made it what we call a big assumption.”¹³ Due to these assumptions, which we don’t even realize we’ve made, Blind Spots cannot be seen without partnership and support of others, no matter how clever or discerning one may be.¹⁴ Malandro applies this issue specifically to organizational leaders stating, “most successful leaders are unaware of two things: (1) the impact of their blind spots on others and (2) the degree to which others work around them and avoid confronting the real issues. What these leaders fail to realize is how their behavior works against them in achieving the very results they want.”¹⁵ She goes on to explain that the issue is, not whether or not we have Blind Spots, but rather, it is how we deal with them:

The real culprits are not the blind spots themselves; the offenders are unidentified and mismanaged blind spots. The automatic nature of blind spots—their ability to appear anytime and anywhere—produces cycles of unproductive behaviors between individuals and groups that undermine change initiatives and business results. These cycles of unproductive behaviors also derail careers, sabotage success, and lead to ineffective decision making and execution. Although people can see the impact of unproductive behavior, they look the other way. It is an uncomfortable situation to deal with because people do not have a constructive method to resolve difficult situations or issues.¹⁶

The idea of clearly seeing something we are, by definition, blind to sounds ludicrous. However, inattention to blind spots simply because we can’t see them can be deadly. As someone without sights asks others to lead them down a path, we must seek help from guides around us who can see our Blind Spots. Malandro confirms that as leaders learned about their Blind Spots, they “were surprised that their actions had such a negative and crushing

¹² Loretta A. Malandro, *Fearless Leadership : How to Overcome Behavioral Blind Spots and Transform Your Organization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 33.

¹³ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 246-247.

¹⁴ Malandro, *Fearless Leadership*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

impact on others.”¹⁷ Malandro also makes the important point that most of the leaders she worked with were good people who were simply ignorant of the problems they were creating:

The vast majority were oblivious and unaware of the impact of their unproductive behavior: they were committed, competent, and caring leaders who had no intention to damage people or undermine the organization. The overwhelming majority of leaders wanted to have a positive impact on others and experienced sincere remorse when they discovered they did not.¹⁸

Bringing this issue to light and asking for advice, help, and accountability requires a tremendous amount of transparency and vulnerability. If an organization truly wants to address unseen, but consequential behavior, it would help to draw in an EI coach from the outside who is able to view employees more objectively and to assist employees in giving each other constructive feedback.

The process of giving and receiving feedback is one of the most important concepts in training. Through the feedback process, we see ourselves as others see us. Through feedback, other people also learn how we see them. Feedback gives information to a person or group either by verbal or nonverbal communication. The information you give tells others how their behavior affects you, how you feel, and what you perceive (feedback and self-disclosure). Feedback is also a reaction by others, usually in terms of their feelings and perceptions, telling you how your behavior affects them (receiving feedback).¹⁹

Part of this journey in giving and receiving feedback relates to the peeling away of masks. Authors Thrall, McNicol, and Lynch address this issue: “Sadly, cruelly, our masks deceive us into believing that we can hide our true selves. Not so. In time, others can usually see what we’re trying to hide. No matter how beautifully formed, our masks eventually present us as tragic figures... because masks always crack or distort or buckle or unravel or wear through or lose their shape.”²⁰

Taking the mask off is difficult, but not impossible. Anthony Demello puts our possibilities well:

Spirituality. Waking up. And as I told you, it is extremely important if you want to wake up to go in for what I call “self-observation.” Be aware of what you’re saying, be aware of what you’re doing, be aware of what you’re thinking, be aware of how you’re acting. Be aware of where you’re coming from, what your motives are. The unaware life is not worth living.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Air University, “The Johari Window: A Model for Soliciting and Giving,” Small Group Instructor Training Course, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/sgitc/read5.htm> (accessed March 7 2011).

²⁰ Bill Thrall, Bruce, McNicol, and John Lynch, *Truefaced: Trust God and others with Who You Really Are*, Rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004), 31.

²¹ Anthony DeMello, *Awareness: The Perils and opportunities of Reality*, May 1992 ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 67.

Leaders who are admired are those who are “honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent.”²² There is no reason anyone, even the most hardened among us, cannot, with effort, humility, and team support, become an admired leader or employee if we are willing to listen to feedback and adjust our ways accordingly. As discussed by Kegan and Leahy in *Immunity to Change*, in self-examination, three steps must be taken: draw on self-awareness, take seriously feedback received, and identify a “set of personal change goals” in order to develop a strong commitment to fulfill.²³

Is the Gain Worth the Pain?

Personal and organizational change is not easy. However, we reject that change to our own detriment. In today’s working world, personal networking and relational efficiency are at a premium. Maintaining healthy relationships in the fast pace of our offices and families is more challenging than ever before. Doing so requires a much more sophisticated paradigm, what Kegan and Leahy refer to as, mental complexity. One study showed that “increased mental complexity and work competence, assessed on a number of dimensions, are correlated.”²⁴ They argue that “we are calling upon workers to understand themselves and their world at a qualitatively higher level of mental complexity.”²⁵ Kegan and Leahy explain this new complexity,

However, many, if not most, of the change challenges you face today and will face tomorrow require something more than incorporating new technical skills into your current mindset. These are the “adaptive challenges,” and they can only be met by transforming your mindset, by advancing to a more sophisticated stage of mental development.²⁶

Turning Sam’s Pain into Everyone’s Gain

Sam returned to her office in an emotionally fragile state and ready to quit her job. Sam’s boss, meanwhile, was shocked and confused by her behavior. Sam was one her best employees and had always been so professional. Thankfully, rather than reacting in anger, Sam’s boss had been coached in EI and received workplace training in increasing one’s emotional intelligence. Sam’s boss was aware of her own blind spot and knew that, despite her intrinsic assumption that the “work trumps feelings,” her “being insensitive of her behavior towards others” blind spot had gotten the best of her again. The boss was self-aware enough to realize that trampling over people’s dignity was not an effective management strategy.

Sam’s boss visited Sam’s office that afternoon to apologize for asking Sam to produce something without sufficient time to prepare it and for not being patient to hear Sam out. Her boss confessed that the company needed Sam’s focus on more important work and that Sam was only assigned that project because they knew they could always count on Sam for quality work. Sam’s boss went on to say that, during the meeting, she realized that the corporate board would have been displeased to know she had diverted Sam’s attention to the project, which is why it had been so abruptly re-assigned to Alex. Sam apologized for her outburst and was then able to more calmly explain her findings from her work on the project. In the end, as a result of the unpleasant episode, Sam and her boss actually wound up respecting and appreciating each other more. Rather than seeking another

²² James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain It and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, 1st ed. (The Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 13.

²³ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

job, Sam came to work the next day feeling confident in her value to the company and eager to contribute her best work.

The Brass Tacks: A Strategy for Increasing EI in Our Workplace

If EI is increasingly important in our workplace and can, with some coaching and work, be improved, then we owe it to ourselves and to the “Sams” among us to invest ourselves and our companies in that effort. How then might one chart that course? Clayton Homes offers us one example.

In the Fall of 2011, Clayton Homes engaged a consulting firm to help assess the business needs for creating a leadership development program. Consultants interviewed 24 leaders throughout Clayton and identified several business imperatives which became the framework for building a leadership program. As a result of that process, Clayton identified five key issues on which to focus:

1. the need for a clear, shared vision and goals
2. more accountability
3. improved communication
4. transparency in decision making, and
5. better integration of business units

Based on the company’s goals, they developed 3 four-day workshops over the span of 18 to 24 months. In one of those workshops attendees learned about strengths and opportunities for improvement as a leader which were heavily based on EI principles. The workshop involved a full 360 assessment of each attendee which included anonymous reviews from peers, direct reports, and upper management. In addition, it included the use of an EI assessment tool to identify room for growth.

Clayton Homes made a wise decision to be attentive to the EI climate in their company. Todd Fulks has pointed out how helpful it has been that everyone in their company can now share a common language and baseline understanding of EI concepts which has the potential to facilitate their ability to encourage one another in their progress. The shared training has also helped the company to define which behaviors and attitudes are simply unacceptable in their corporate culture.

In organizations with which we have worked, and at the law firm of Murphy & Grantland, a number of similar strategies have been implemented to evaluate and address an organization’s EI climate. We also encourage strategies to sustain that focus as individuals continue their daily journey towards improving EI, both personally and corporately, as follows:

- Agree as a leadership team on the importance of learning about and developing our EI
- Develop and keep reminding our teams to use EI vocabulary
- Provide readings and other resources for our teams
- Discuss EI principles as part of regular meeting agendas
- Encourage illustrations of good/poor EI by team members, either in their own lives or what they have observed
- Lead 3-month training modules for all team members which includes testing to identify areas for growth
- Include EI principles in Orientation/onboarding classes for all new employees

- Identify at least one area of focus for improvement of your EI
- Engage in coaching, executive coaching, mentoring and reverse-mentoring.

In addition to these specifics, leadership teams are encouraged to always be aware of the following as they consider how to best address the EI growth in their organizations:

1. Choose the right tools and use them wisely.
2. Set realistic expectations for yourself and for others.
3. Understand that some people are more coachable than others. Everyone won't be ready or willing to enthusiastically adopt these ideas and implement them in their lives.
4. Be persistently patient. Whatever happens, keep emphasizing the crucial role EI can play in your team members' professional and personal lives. If you stay the course, you will see long-term benefits both to your bottom-line and to your team members' emotional and relational well-being.

Conclusion

Improving EI is a worthy goal for businesses and individuals. Understanding ourselves and committing to bring value to any setting in which we find ourselves will help further the interests of our businesses, improve the quality of our relationships, and increase our emotional health. As leaders, we can advocate for an EI ethos that will revolutionize ourselves and our organizations.