

BEYOND THE HYPE

Emotional intelligence sounds good
in theory, but can project managers
really use it to get ahead?

BY SARAH FISTER GALE // ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HOOPER



ONCE AN OBSCURE SCIENTIFIC CONCEPT, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE HAS OFFICIALLY LANDED THE DUBIOUS DISTINCTION OF CORPORATE BUZZWORD.

Since Daniel Goleman's bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ* was first published in 1995, a cascade of books, articles and papers has followed—most of it gushingly positive. It sounds almost too good to be true: People who are self-aware and in tune with other people's feelings are more successful on the job, or so the theory goes. The reality is a bit more nuanced. Emotionally intelligent project managers are no more likely to achieve project goals than their "unenlightened" peers. The ways in which they achieve those goals, however, tend to win them praise and promotions, while many of their counterparts are left stewing over why their careers are stuck in neutral.

John D. Mayer, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, N.H., USA, offers the example of two team leaders, one with low emotional intelligence, the other with high. "Let's say, for example, that both leaders get a job done on time and with equal quality," he says. "The difference is that the person with high emotional intelligence will create a team environment where people feel liked and respected—where they enjoy their work and feel better about the organization. The leader with low emotional intelligence will more likely leave his [or her] team frustrated, nervous about their jobs or unhappy with the company."

A person who has high emotional intelligence can read facial, verbal and physical cues that express how a person is feeling as well as manage their own emotions. "It's about how well people can deal with their own emotions and recognize emotions in others," he says.

A high emotional intelligence rating does not necessarily mean someone is highly emotional, says Tim Sparrow, founder of the Centre for Applied Emotional Intelligence, a Cheltenham, England-based trade group for emotional intelligence practitioners in Europe. "You don't want someone who is always pessimistic as a leader, nor do you want someone who is wildly optimistic," he says.

The key to strong emotional intelligence is having a balanced and appropriate approach to emotions. And the higher someone is in the team hierarchy, the more important it is for that person to have the trait. "When leaders are not emotionally intelligent, they spend a lot of time fighting, worrying and protecting themselves and that's all a distraction from the project," Mr. Sparrow says. "As a team leader you need to be flexible and responsive, balancing the skills and needs of everyone on the team."

A person with high emotional intelligence can "have a profound impact on the success and longevity of teams," says David Caruso, Ph.D., research affiliate in the psychology department at Yale University, and founder and CEO of consultancy EI Skills Group, both

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based in New Haven, Conn., USA. "They are better able to read the emotional needs of others and manage their own emotions, which enables them to evade conflict and resolve relational issues among team members before they impact the project."

Being able to accurately interpret how a decision will affect people and relationships is especially critical when the implementation of new programs or other events will have a negative impact on the team, says Connie Wayne, manager of executive development for Eaton Corp., Cleveland, Ohio, USA. "With change management, leaders can't just look at the corporate impact of a new system," she says. "They need to examine how it will impact the people and how to help them embrace change. A leader with high emotional intelligence will be more successful in achieving that."

Test Time

The question is, can you boost your emotional intelligence? It's one thing to recognize the importance of being responsive to the team's emotional needs but

quite another to figure out how to do that when the project is over budget and everyone is fighting over who is at fault.

Emotional intelligence can indeed be improved upon, although it may not be a topic that belongs in a classroom.

First, you have to figure out where you rank and what your shortcomings are. Of the many tools available to measure a person's emotional intelligence, the best-known is probably the Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, designed by a team of subject matter experts that includes Dr. Mayer and Dr. Caruso. The test measures the ability to perceive, understand and manage emotions, Dr. Caruso explains. It can be useful to get a base reading on an individual or team, but should be followed up with a feedback session on what the results mean and what can be done to improve the score.

In Control

Developing greater self-awareness is the first step in gaining more control over the way you manage your



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—GALBA BRIGHT, GALBA BRIGHT & ASSOCIATES, ST. JAMES, JAMAICA



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—ANTHONY MERSINO, PMP, THE PROJECT ADVISORS GROUP, CHICAGO, ILL., USA

own emotions—and how you react to others, says Valerie A. Jachimowicz, PMP, project manager in the information services group at Wyeth Pharmaceutical Co., Philadelphia, Pa., USA.

“As a project manager, anything that helps you understand yourself is helpful,” she says. Ms. Jachimowicz discovered emotional intelligence in 2000 when she read Mr. Goleman’s first book, which she credits with helping her connect the dots on elements of her behavior that were holding her back on the job. “I have a ‘smart mouth,’ and sometimes it gets me into trouble” she says. “When I get frustrated or angry, I can lose control.”

Because of her emotional outbursts, people didn’t want to work with her and she was criticized for the

way she communicated. By doing her own research into emotional intelligence and using her reviews to evaluate how her emotions were impacting her performance, she was able to make some changes. “I learned that when I get emotional, I have to be more careful. I don’t get sucked into emotional situations like I used to,” she says. “I found that once I was more aware, I became better at managing myself.”

Even so, Ms. Jachimowicz says emotional intelligence doesn’t make for a great training topic for teams. “You have to be ready to make changes,” she says. “If you have emotional issues, then you are likely not self-actualized enough to benefit from emotional intelligence training.”

Therein lies the rub of emotional intelligence. Because people deal with their emotions in unique ways, a classroom training program isn’t likely to have a big impact. “Training can be useful to teach people the concepts of emotional intelligence, but everyone’s emotional intelligence needs are different and what you

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

Want to know how you rate on emotional intelligence? Take this quiz developed for *PM Network* by Anthony Mersino, author of the book, *Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers: The People Skills You Need to Achieve Outstanding Results* [Amacom Books], scheduled for release in July.

1. Do you use sarcasm in your communications with team members or other project stakeholders? YES NO
2. Do you frequently say “yes” to action items in meetings or agree to take on work and then regret it later? YES NO
3. Do you feel the need to crack a joke or change the subject during tough conversations? YES NO
4. Do you find it easier to set the record straight or vent your frustration in an e-mail rather than in person? YES NO
5. Are your relationships with project team members or sponsors superficial and limited to the task at hand? YES NO
6. Do you get upset or take it personally when your boss or a project sponsor is angry? YES NO
7. Do you ever find yourself dwelling on conflict with project team members or fantasizing about ways to get even? YES NO
8. Do you wish you were more charismatic or had more presence as a project manager? YES NO

Now add up the number of times you responded “no.”

7–8 You’re in the minority of project managers adept at handling their emotions.

4–6 You have some strong areas but also some opportunities for improvement.

1–3 There are significant gaps in emotional intelligence impacting your performance as a project manager.

If you’re wondering how you got that score, here are more detailed explanations for each question.

1. Your sarcasm contains an element of truth meant to hurt. The fact that you’re communicating indirectly instead of confronting the issue shows you’re scared. You may tack a “just kidding” on the end of your sarcastic statement, but you’re not.
2. Usually you say “yes” because you’re afraid other people won’t like you, they’ll be disappointed or angry, or won’t think you’re valuable. The irony is if you say “yes” when you really should say “no,” you often end up being resentful or feeling like a victim.
3. For some project managers, tough conversations are so uncomfortable they’ll do anything to avoid them. You fear you’ll disappoint others or make them angry. Or, your desire to be liked overrides your willingness to tell the truth or confront others.
4. Using e-mail to vent or “straighten someone out” may make you feel better momentarily, but all you do is broadcast your emotional immaturity. Confront others or resolve the conflict in person.
5. Project management is about getting work done through people. If you build meaningful relationships with project team members and other stakeholders, you create a positive team environment, increase your ability to deal with conflict and encourage others to perform at their best.
6. Taking your emotional cues from other people indicates a problem with emotional boundaries. Let others have their own emotions and know that their emotions are independent of your own. No one can put you in a bad mood, nor can you put others into a bad mood.
7. Dwelling and obsessing are considered emotional triggers, and are likely to lead to an emotional breakdown. When you find yourself acting like this, you likely have lost your objectivity and are no longer focused on what is most important. Ask yourself what you’re avoiding, or how you can deal with the conflict in the most expedient and honest way.
8. People are drawn to leaders who understand and use emotions to communicate and build relationships. These leaders come across as genuine and self-confident and are often entrusted with larger and more complex projects.



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need to do to enhance your emotional intelligence depends on where they are," adds Galba Bright, principal consultant of Galba Bright & Associates, a provider of emotional intelligence knowledge products and services based in St. James, Jamaica. "Results are much more likely to come from coaching than training."

That coaching can take many forms. Trusted colleagues, for example, can serve as "a good low-cost means of improving emotional intelligence," Mr. Bright says.

If you recruit someone inside your company, choose a peer, preferably someone working on the same project, who will be close enough to see you work during high-stress situations, suggests Anthony Mersino, PMP, president of the Project Advisors Group, a project management consulting firm in Chicago, Ill., USA. "After a meeting, ask

that person how you did and what you could have done better."

This kind of feedback should never be given unsolicited, he warns. If you see someone struggling with their emotional responses or cues, first ask yourself if pointing out their shortcomings is in the best interest of the person or team—or just payback for bad behavior. Also consider your own feelings to see if you are sad or angry at that person. "If you think your comments will help, begin by asking, 'Can I give you some feedback?'" he says. "And don't just point out the negatives."

If there's no one on the team you trust to tell you the unvarnished truth, consider bringing in professionals, Mr. Mersino says. He started working on his own emotional intelligence with a life coach five years ago and believes it changed his career. After years of

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working on mid-level projects at IBM, Ameritech and Unisys, Mr. Mersino was frustrated by his inability to move up—but looking back, he can see why it was happening.

"I was abrasive and communicated with a lot of inappropriate humor and sarcasm," he says. Solely focused on tasks, he avoided relationship-building opportunities, going so far as to remove the visitor's chair from his office so people wouldn't stop in to chat. "I was there to work, not to make friends," Mr. Mersino says. "But as a project manager, you can't do that. Projects are about people, not tasks."

His life coach helped him see that work was not about

a "to-do" list, it was about relationships. Thanks to his newfound emotional awareness, "I've been financially rewarded and have had greater success on projects."

Mr. Mersino's transformation wasn't immediate, though.

It can take years to reverse ingrained behaviors and emotional responses, Mr. Bright says. "You have to think about emotional intelligence improvement as a process," he says. "People change when they recognize the need for change, internalize new behaviors and learn to get out of their own way." PM

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