

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: THE OXYGEN MASK OF LEADERSHIP

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When we enter leadership positions, we accept a great deal of responsibility for those within our influence. In preparation for these opportunities, it is important to look within ourselves to make sure we are ready for what is to come. By understanding and developing our emotional intelligence, we can learn to better understand the needs of ourselves and of those around us, thus strengthening our ability to lead.

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever flown on an airplane, you have probably seen the safety procedure presented by the captain and flight attendants before take-off. During this presentation, passengers are educated on simple flight-safety procedures, such as when to buckle their seatbelts and the location of the exits. At one point, passengers are instructed on what to do if oxygen masks are needed during an emergency. In such a situation, oxygen masks will be deployed above the passengers' seats. Once this happens, passengers should first secure their own oxygen mask before assisting those around them who may be struggling with their own. This process of taking care of yourself before attending to others ensures that people are not putting themselves at an unnecessary risk, while also increasing passenger effectiveness in aiding those around them. For example, if a parent was to secure a child's mask before their own, they risk losing consciousness, and the child may not know what to do next, creating a greater danger. If the parent is taken care of first, they can adequately attend to the child, ensuring their safety.

Like an in-flight emergency, we may sometimes find ourselves in situations where we are expected to be a leader to those around us. Leadership can be both a complicated and daunting task. By taking on leadership positions, we become accountable for things like the success, the performance, and even the well-being of those we lead. If we bring these burdens upon ourselves, we must be prepared to bear them, or we could collapse under their weight. Like a passenger without oxygen, our role as a leader could be suffocated as we attempt to help others before we properly help ourselves.

How does one prepare for the complicated role of leadership? As we look around us, we may find that some people seem to be natural-born leaders, easily guiding and influencing those around them. For others, however, this is not so easy. Some people struggle in the process of learning how to be a leader, even sometimes believing they are simply unfit to lead. This, however, could not be more untrue. Leadership strengths *can* be developed and implemented, even by those who feel they cannot be leaders. We improve our capacity to help others by securing our own oxygen masks first by tending to something within ourselves. This important feature we must attend to is our emotional intelligence.

Within this analysis, we will define emotional intelligence and explore how it plays an instrumental role within effective leadership. We will also analyze how the proper development of emotional intelligence can directly increase our capacity for leadership through the magnification of the four emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, relationship-management, and social-awareness (Hay Group, McClelland Center for Research and Innovation, & Wolff, 2005).

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Emotional intelligence is defined as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 5). In other words, emotional intelligence is our capacity to interpret and react to the actions of the people around us, as well as to ourselves.

According to one study, which analyzed subjects of high leadership ability, it was found that there is a “strong relationship between superior

performing . . . leaders and emotional competence” (Cavallo & Brienza, 2006, p. 3). The researchers in this same study go on to state their findings supported “theorist’s suggestions that the social, emotional and relational competency set commonly referred to as emotional intelligence, is a distinguishing factor in leadership performance” (p. 4). We can see from this example that emotional intelligence is a trait maintained by those who are effective leaders, and this strong correlation between emotional intelligence and leadership does, in fact, exist.

In another study that compared the emotional intelligence levels between leaders and non-leaders (defined as those holding leadership and non-leadership positions within a European multinational company), it was discovered that “leaders had significantly higher trait emotional intelligence scores than non-leaders, which was largely an effect of the well-being . . . and self-control . . . factors, which reached significantly higher levels in leaders” (Siegling, Nielsen, & Petrides, 2014, p. 66). These findings imply that the “significantly higher” emotional intelligence levels present among leaders stemmed from well-being and self-control, which are part of the previously defined key competencies of self-management (which will be discussed later in this analysis). This demonstrates that development of these competencies actually has an impact on leadership ability.

The potential impact of emotional intelligence development on leadership ability may be more substantial than we realize. In one study, which analyzed the effectiveness of emotional intelligence training versus personal leadership training, it was found that “emotional intelligence educational development was effective, while the personal leadership development was not” (Crowne, K. A., Young, T. M., Goldman, B., Patterson, B., Krouse, A. M., & Proenca, J., 2017, p. 217). This example demonstrates how powerful emotional intelligence can be in preparing a person for leadership. Interestingly, the study goes on to include that “data also showed a positive significant relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership” (p. 217). Transformational leadership is considered to occur when leaders and followers inspire each other to new heights in performance and morality (Burns, 1978). It is a powerful concept in the realm of leadership and is considered to be an ideal strategy to strive toward in developing leaders. The connection drawn here

between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership shows how effective and powerful emotional intelligence can be when it comes to leadership development. It seems that emotional intelligence can lead to the inspiration of a leader's surrounding audience.

From these examples, we have seen that emotional intelligence is a cornerstone of leadership ability. It seems that if one attempts to improve their ability to lead, developing emotional intelligence would be an imperative part of the process. It has been shown to be more effective than specific personal leadership training, and is even connected to transformational leadership. Based on this data, it seems emotional intelligence should form the foundation for leadership training to be built upon.

REVIEW OF EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE INVENTORY (ECI)

Emotional intelligence can be broken down into four measurable core competencies within the *Emotional Competence Inventory* (Hay Group et al., 2005). This inventory is labeled as a "360-degree tool designed to assess the emotional competencies of individuals and organizations" (Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 2), but we can also use its structure to dissect emotional intelligence into smaller, more easily understandable parts. Within this inventory, the competencies are labeled as *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *relationship-management*, and *social-awareness*; each one relates to more specific categories making up the complete definition of emotional intelligence. By understanding these *clusters*, and revealing the competencies that exist within them, we can deepen our understanding of emotional intelligence and how it can be developed to improve leadership.

SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is defined as "the ability to recognize one's emotions, internal states, preferences, resources and intuition" (Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 3). Within this larger cluster lies three specific competencies. These competencies are:

- 1) *Emotional Awareness*
Recognizing one's emotions and their effects
- 2) *Accurate Self-Assessment*
Knowing one's strengths and limits

3) *Self-Confidence*

A strong sense of one's self-worth and capabilities

(Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 3)

As we improve our self-awareness through the strengthening of these three competencies, we can form a more congruent image of ourselves, aligning with our own internal identities. Leaders perform better when they show that they are receptive to feedback from others (Steiner, 2014). It is important for a leader to accept feedback from outside sources and, first, learn how to accept criticism and feedback from oneself. When this is achieved, one can make personal changes to form a more congruent and self-supporting image.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Awareness of self also allows for proper control over one's circumstances or proper self-management. Self-management is defined as the ability to "[manage] one's internal states, impulses, and resources" (Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 3). Within this core cluster lies six competencies:

1) *Emotional Self-Control*

Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check

2) *Transparency*

Maintaining integrity, acting congruently with one's values

3) *Adaptability*

Flexibility in handling change

4) *Achievement*

Striving to improve or meeting a standard of excellence

5) *Initiative*

Readiness to act on opportunities

6) *Optimism*

Persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks

(Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 3)

As we increase our self-awareness, we gain insight on how to properly manage our behavior for reacting to our internal states appropriately. As we are better able to evaluate ourselves and our behavior (applying the use of awareness and management together), we can take note of violations to our own standards of behavior, as well as the standards set by those around us. This increased awareness allows us to deliver more appropriate reactions to our current state of being, as well as to the events taking place around us.

SOCIAL-AWARENESS

Social-awareness is defined as “how people handle relationships and awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns” (Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 3). Being the first core cluster to directly reference the awareness and treatment of others, it contains the competencies of:

- 1) *Empathy*
Sensing others' feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns
- 2) *Organizational Awareness*
Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships
- 3) *Service Orientation*
Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting customers' needs

(Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 3)

We can demonstrate social-awareness by correctly interpreting and responding to the actions of others, whether to individuals or groups. If we can correctly interpret messages of others, we gain credibility as communicators, as well as leaders. As stated above, leaders perform better when they are receptive to feedback from others (Steiner, 2014). When leaders respond to the concerns of those whom they lead, their followers are more likely to respond positively. As a result, the relationship between the two is strengthened. This effect can also be greatly enhanced when a leader's self-awareness and self-management are in balance, as these competencies can often be interpreted nonverbally by those they lead.

RELATIONSHIP-MANAGEMENT

The relationship-management cluster is defined as “the skill or adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others” (Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 4). This cluster contains six competencies, labeled and defined as:

- 1) *Developing Others*
Sensing others’ development needs and bolstering their abilities
- 2) *Inspirational Leadership*
Inspiring and guiding individuals and groups
- 3) *Change Catalyst*
Initiating or managing change
- 4) *Influence*
Wielding effective tactics for persuasion
- 5) *Conflict Management*
Negotiating and resolving disagreements, and
- 6) *Teamwork & Collaboration*
Working with others toward shared goals. Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals

(Hay Group et al., 2005, p. 4)

The relationship management process can sometimes be compared to a constant tug-of-war, as relationships are continuously being negotiated. Understanding and developing each of these competencies makes it far more likely for a leader to create and maintain meaningful relationships and loyal followers.

Though these clusters of competencies are complex, they are competencies that can be learned. According to a psychological study, emotional intelligence skills, “can be developed through a systematic and consistent approach to building competence in personal and social awareness, self-management, and social skill” (Cavallo & Brienza, 2006, pg. 5). Just as we strive to improve our abilities in things such as instruments, games, work, or even daily tasks, we can also increase our competency for emotional intelligence.

Like a muscle, emotional intelligence needs to be fed, built, and maintained over time. If we wish to lead, we need to take special care to remain self-aware enough to admit when we need improvement in any of these clusters.

CONCLUSION

Within this analysis, we have defined emotional intelligence and explored how it plays an instrumental role within effective leadership. We have also examined how the proper development of emotional intelligence can directly increase our capacity for leadership through the development of the four core clusters of emotional intelligence and their specific emotional competencies.

As we take the first steps toward improving our leadership, we can stop and recognize emotional intelligence as a building foundation and fuel source to power effective leadership. If we can properly prepare and help ourselves to grow through the development of emotional intelligence, our capacity for helping others through our leadership will be much greater. As we work to construct our self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship-management, we supply ourselves with the power of emotional intelligence, the oxygen mask of leadership.

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