

What is emotional intelligence?

At its simplest, emotional intelligence is the ability to recognise your own and other's emotional state and to be able to act in ways that take account of that. However, there is far more to this than may be apparent on the surface, certainly more than many people realise when they talk about the concept. However, before exploring it in some detail, there is one aspect of emotional intelligence that needs to be considered - is it a trait (ie something that is relatively fixed, like other personality traits) or is it an ability, something that we can learn and develop.

For those who see it as trait, it sits alongside other personality traits. Although this doesn't mean that you cannot develop your understanding of your own and others emotional states, it does mean that you may have a head start or a major hurdle to overcome, depending on your natural ability. Those who are naturally poor at recognising emotions may learn to pick up cues, and those who are naturally good at it, can become even more discriminating.

For those who regard it as an ability, it is something that we learn to do and so can learn to be better at, although other personality traits may put you at an advantage or disadvantage in being able to recognise both your own and, particularly, other people's. Finally, it may be a mixed phenomenon, relying on certain inherent traits that we are born with combined with learned abilities that enable us to become more or less proficient.

Can you become more emotionally intelligent? A research exercise in France showed that a combination of 15 hours training plus some support in application led to significant increases in 'emotional competencies in the intervention group in contrast with the control group. This increase resulted in ... enhanced subjective and physical well-being, as well as improved quality of social and marital relationships in the intervention group. No significant change occurred in the control group.'

Clearly this wasn't a work-focussed, but the findings do suggest that it is quite possible for emotional intelligence (or competence, as they termed it) to be enhanced and have strong, positive effects.

The effects of emotion on our thinking

Professor Vilayanur Ramachandran, the Director of the Center (sic) for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego, tells of a patient who had suffered an injury which severed the connection between the fusiform gyrus (a part of the brain that has a role in recognising faces) and the amygdala (which plays a role in our emotional response to external stimuli). Although the patient had no problem in recognising everyday objects, when he saw his mother he reacted to her by asking why she was pretending to be his mother. He could recognise that she looked like his mother but because he got no emotional reaction (as the link from the visual area of the brain to the emotional area had been severed) he knew it wasn't really her. When he spoke to her on the 'phone he had no problem recognising her because the linkages from the part of the brain processing auditory data to the emotional area were working fine.

So what? Well, if your ability to recognise someone so close to you as your mother depends as much on getting an emotional response as being able to see her clearly, what else may emotions do in processing data? The evidence suggests that the linkages between the sensory processing centres of our brains (ie the bits that process sights, sounds, smells, physical sensation and taste) and our emotional centre work faster than the linkages to the higher cognitive functions, so that by the time we process the data in our rational brains, we have already had an emotional response which informs that higher cognition.

Evolutionary biologists would explain this as being part of our survival mechanism - if we have to think about everything we would lose vital milliseconds in responding to the threats from enemies and predators, poisonous foods and other dangers. You don't have to think 'It's a tiger'; just hear the growl, feel afraid and run. The fact that we now live in a different environment entirely is immaterial; what took hundreds of thousands of years to evolve won't change in the few thousand years since we moved into a safer environment. Our brain still operates in the same way, and our emotions still act to guide our behaviour.

It is important to recognise this because there tends to be a dominant idea in most organisations that a rational, analytical, objective and information-driven approach to decision-making is an adult approach that leads to better decisions being made, whereas an emotive, subjective, uninformed approach is childish and leads to poorer decisions. What emotional intelligence argues is that there is not a dichotomous choice - rationality versus emotion - but that we are all rational and emotional, and that emotions play a part in all our thinking. Being emotionally intelligent means recognising and understanding this and using the knowledge to ensure that you benefit from the contribution that both can offer.

So what are emotions?

Emotion (sometimes called affect) is something that we are all aware of but is very hard to define or even identify clearly, even though we are nearly all capable of feeling them (apart from a very tiny minority with extreme personality disorders who appear to feel no emotions). Some researchers argue that there are some basic emotions that are common to all humans and that these can combine to create more complex emotional reactions. One of the leading figures in this field, Paul Ekman has explored how the facial expression of emotions (non-verbal communications) is common across all cultures. He argues that there are six basic emotions:

1. Anger
2. Disgust
3. Fear
4. Happiness
5. Sadness
6. Surprise

Another researcher in this field, Robert Plutchik has added two further emotions to this list Trust and Anticipation, and proposed that these eight operate as pairs of opposites:

Joy vs Sadness

Trust vs Disgust

Fear vs Anger

Surprise vs Anticipation

He goes on to argue that combinations of these emotions produce others (like the primary colours blue and yellow are combined to produce green). For example, anticipation and joy combine to form optimism, and their opposites (sadness and surprise) combine to form disapproval.

Why does this matter? Because the complexity of different emotions combining together to produce these composite emotions makes it hard for us to understand how we are feeling ourselves, let alone to recognise other people's emotional response. For example, a member of your team who does or says something that you regard as completely unacceptable will generate feelings of disgust (that the person should do that) and anger

(that they have done it), creating a feeling of contempt (a composite of disgust and anger). On top of this is the degree of emotion being felt - how does deep disgust combined with mild anger differ from mild disgust and deep anger? And how do both reveal themselves; it might be contempt in both cases, but in a very different form.

This is not to say that this is the definitive model of emotions; there are other theories and perspectives, but this model builds on a substantial body of evidence and certainly offers a framework for observing, reflecting on and making sense of your own and other's emotional responses. This is important; without such a framework it becomes a very superficial process. By being able to interrogate your own and other's emotional responses from a template of emotions, it makes it much easier to recognise the emotions that are in play.

The thinking behind emotional intelligence is that we should be encouraged to pause before responding to external stimuli, to make these observations and reflect on their significance and meaning. That's not to say we don't do this; we are able to recognise other's emotional states, even if we are consciously aware that we are doing so. The brain places enormous demands on the body as it uses up to 20% of the body's energy whilst only accounting for 2% of the body weight. This encourages a phenomenon called *cognitive ease* that leads us to use techniques like heuristics (rules of thumb) and intuition to help us make decisions without having to do too much cognitive work.

Cognitive ease

Daniel Kahneman (in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*) talks about the use of simple shortcuts in our cognition as System 1 thinking, the ability of our brains to operate automatically, with little or no reflection. We do it all the time when we drive a car, for example, as many people will have experienced when they realise that they have been driving for some time but can't remember any part of the journey. Our brains have been in automatic mode. We are also pretty adept at recognising an obvious emotional state in others, and responding accordingly, using learnt techniques to do so (it worked before so it will work again).

We tend to look for simple explanations for events because that avoids having to undertake too much cognitive work. We will select those elements of the current situation that seem to be the most relevant to because they fit into our existing perceptions of the situation - they are said to be *associatively coherent*. This enables us to make a plausible explanation of events and use that to arrive at a conclusion that follows from that, probably (like all those cookery programmes on TV) 'one we made earlier'.

But, in the workplace, you often need to avoid easy solutions, you need to be prepared to use what is called System 2 thinking, applying your cognitive energy to the problem. This requires conscious mental effort, and often involves the recall of ways you have learnt of analysing a problem and making sense of it then. This is what emotional intelligence encourages you to do in situations where your System 1 thinking would normally click in and you are ready to adopt a standard response. Instead you should apply a cognitive process, and think about your own and the other's emotions, and why they are reacting as they are, looking for cues in their behaviour and also being conscious of your own.

Recognising emotions

People show their emotions in a number of ways, but the most obvious is through their facial expressions, and that's for a reason. Facial expression is a form of communication, and we display our emotional state for a reason, to tell other people how we are feeling so that they will respond appropriately. We also show it in our posture (we will be much more active and open in our posture if we are happy, but our dropped shoulders and closed posture tells you when someone is unhappy). You will also hear it in our tone of voice and its volume;

unhappy people tend to speak more quietly, disgusted people will be holding their mouths differently, due to the look of disgust on their face, and that changes the sounds they make.

Finally, it's important to realise that we store emotions when we store our memories of events and experiences. Memory isn't a little container in our brains, but a network of linked neurons that together store different elements of the memory, not just what we saw (a visual memory) or heard (an auditory memory), but also how we felt (an emotional memory). That memory can be recalled by a trigger which consist of just one element of the memory; someone who has suffered a traumatic event where they heard a whistle just beforehand, will respond to the sound of a whistle by recalling the event, including the emotional response that it evoked - perhaps feel a deep sadness.

It's possible to do this by simply shutting your eyes and recalling a significant, positive event in your life (winning something or just completing a half marathon, getting married or having a child, for example) and visualising a key moment in that event. If you can do this in a quiet and private place, you will find that you can see the event, perhaps hear what was happening and, most importantly, feel traces of the emotions that you felt on the occasion. This is a useful technique as it can help you in gaining control of your emotional response, by using positive events to help overcome any negative emotions you may be feeling. It is called *anchoring*, as it uses the positive event as an anchor to both recall and fix that emotional state in your brain just before having to embark on an activity where the negative emotion would have acted as a barrier to you.

Techniques for becoming more emotionally intelligent

No matter how good you may be (or believe your are) at recognising and managing your own and other's emotional states, it's always worth trying to get better at it. The essence of emotional intelligence is conscious and focussed thinking about your emotions, the emotions of others and the values that guide you, before taking action.

Let's look at these different elements in turn, as each is significant in enabling you to be come better at leading other people, by taking account of the effect that emotions have on our thinking and our behaviour.

Reflecting on your own emotions means starting with the actual emotion (not with the list of emotions or the concepts of emotional intelligence):

- How did you feel?
- What seemed to trigger the emotion(s)?
- What effect did this have on your thinking and on your behaviour?

Doing this is a conscious activity - it can't happen without you deliberately doing it. If a significant event is about to happen, spend some time beforehand reflecting on how you feel about it and what effect that is having on you and afterwards about how you felt during it and its effect. This will be enormously valuable in helping you to take greater control of your emotions.

It's very easy to find that reflection becomes a process of making the facts fit the theory, or to fit better to your sense of self - your self-esteem (it's hard to admit to feeling angry that your ideas weren't given the attention you had hoped they would) and self-efficacy (if you see yourself as a rational person who is in control of the situation, then admitting feeling a bit afraid can be daunting).

Start with your own emotions; until you have developed an insight into your own emotions you can't hope to gain an insight into other people's. Recognise that you may well be feeling different emotions simultaneously and some may be stronger than others. A critical part of the activity is to identify which emotions tend to be associated with particular activities (or

types of activity). Over time the patterns will start to emerge and tell you about the way that you respond emotionally to different activities, events or experiences, enabling you to be better able to recognise what is happening to you when such activities, events or experiences occur unexpectedly.

Once you feel confident about recognising your own emotions, start to focus on other's emotions - what do other people seem to be feeling? You can use your knowledge of communications - especially their non-verbal signals to gain insights into that they are feeling as well as saying or doing, such as avoiding eye contact (suggesting negative emotional reactions) or having false smiles. Be ready to observe other people consciously - not by staring at them but by thinking about what they are saying and why they are saying it as you observe them, and using this to help you develop insights into individual's particular characteristics and the signals they send when they are feeling particular emotions, so that you become alert to them. This will help you to make better sense of what they are saying - to see the meaning behind the words.

Taking control of your emotional state

The whole point of developing your emotional intelligence is not just to recognise your own and other's emotions, but to use this knowledge to shape your own behaviour and also to influence others. For example, people do have a tendency to copy other people's facial expressions (it's called facial mimicry) and this facial mimicry can stimulate the corresponding emotion, which is sometimes called emotional contagion. In other words, we tend to smile when we are happy, and if we are smiling other people tend to smile as well (in fact, this usually occurs within 500 milliseconds after the onset of the stimulus, seeing you smile) and, because they are smiling, they tend to feel happy!

Is this being manipulative? It's hard so say 'No', since it is designed to bring about changes in people's thinking and behaviour, but this is why your values and integrity are so important. If your behaviour is driven by a desire to achieve an outcome in line with your own and other's values and goals, then it's possible to argue that it is being used for a valid purpose. More significantly, it happens inadvertently anyway - humans are emotional animals, and our emotions have a powerful influence on us. Even without meaning to, what you say and what you do will affect people and how they feel. Emotional intelligence is about making this a conscious activity and trying to improve your chances of influencing others in a positive direction.

How long does it take to become proficient? As long as you have to spend on it, because there is no perfect state, only improvement as you learn and reflect. And just because you can do something well doesn't mean that you do it well - it is the conscious focus on it that makes you develop and enables you to use what you have learnt.

You don't need to spend ten years just trying to become an expert at emotional intelligence, but you do need to recognise that the best way to become at least adequate at it (not a bad objective) is a willingness to engage in consistent practice. Being emotionally intelligent - or making effort to become more emotionally intelligent - will help you to understand what lies behind other people's thinking and their behaviour.

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Further sources:

Watch Professor Ramachandran present a TED Talk about how the brain works, including the story of the man who couldn't recognise his mother:

https://www.ted.com/talks/vs_ramachandran_3_clues_to_understanding_your_brain

A second Ted Talk, by Professor Lisa Feldman Barrett, explains how we construct emotions and how we can take better control of them:

https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_feldman_barrett_you_aren_t_at_the_mercy_of_your_emotions_your_brain_creates_them?referrer=playlist-what_are_emotions