Why self-aware leaders are more productive and effective

By Hajra Rahim

Author and psychologist, Daniel Goleman, explains the link between emotional intelligence and leadership, and why good leaders are those who master self-awareness.

*What is emotional intelligence and what is its role in leadership?*

Being emotionally intelligent means being self-aware, leading yourself, being empathetic and managing relationships accordingly.

If you think of the worst and best bosses you’ve ever had, it had nothing to do with their title or degree, but everything to do with the kind of person they were – for example, whether they were emotionally intelligent or not. People want to work for a person who is.

In partnership with the Korn Ferry institute, I developed a 360-degree test that assessed leaders on 12 emotional intelligence competencies, such as empathy, teamwork and having a positive outlook.

It’s about knowing what you’re feeling, why you’re feeling it, and how it impacts on your work. These competencies can be learned.

*How can a leader master emotional intelligence?*

A coach or a 360 test will provide an impartial assessment of your strengths and limits. Once you get the analysis, pick a competence to work on, whether it’s empathy or relationship management.

Self-awareness is the least visible emotion, but is an incredible predictor of the level of emotional intelligence. Those who have high self-awareness tend to have at least 10 or 12 competencies, while those who are low have one or two. The effectiveness and productivity of that person, and those who work for them, goes up and down accordingly.

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The common cold of leadership is bad listening. Leaders can often tune out and cut people off when they're talking.

They might want to work on that and stop their impulse to take over. Instead, they should empathize with how the other person sees the situation, absorb what they want and need, and respond accordingly. Those are several steps that might need practice. It’s about deciding whether to act out those feelings and impulses, or pause and expand the gap between impulse and reacting.

What skills make a good leader?

While skills such as inspiring and motivating people and teamwork tend to be the most visible, they’re not necessarily the most important.

For example, if you’re good at conflict management and bringing issues out into the open, but not good at managing yourself, you wouldn't want to be one of the people who work for you. There’s not one formula for being an outstanding leader, but you need one strength in each of these areas: self-awareness, self-management, empathy and relationship management.

What do you say to those who think that emotions shouldn’t drive your decisions as a leader?

Emotional intelligence means being intelligent about your emotions. Those emotions are important data when it comes to making a decision. If you have five strategies in front of you and you need to decide which one to go with, you may have all the data, but there's something that goes beyond it – your life experience.

You only get that from listening to your gut feeling – that’s data too. Different aspects of emotional intelligence are useful in different ways, which is why listening to your emotions is important. On the other hand, not letting your most destructive emotions take over in certain situations is important in a different way. Emotional intelligence is nuanced; it’s not one thing you need to be able to do your job.

What is the role of emotion in leadership today?

Managing emotions has become more important. Leaders are far more likely to face a disruptive technology or competitor as the speed of change has quickened so much.
What we used to think of as crises are now more routine, which means that it’s more important for leaders to manage themselves as well as other people. It’s about taking charge of a situation and not panicking.