

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

How Emotional Intelligence Became a Key Leadership Skill

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Anyone trying to come up to speed on emotional intelligence would have a pretty easy time of it since the concept is remarkably recent, and its application to business newer still. The term was coined in 1990 in a research paper by two psychology professors, John D. Mayer of UNH and Peter Salovey of Yale. Some years later, [Mayer defined it](#) in HBR this way:

From a scientific (rather than a popular) standpoint, emotional intelligence is the ability to accurately perceive your own and others' emotions; to understand the signals that emotions send about relationships; and to manage your own and others' emotions. It doesn't necessarily include the qualities (like optimism, initiative, and self-confidence) that some popular definitions ascribe to it.

It took almost a decade after the term was coined for Rutgers psychologist Daniel Goleman to establish the importance of emotional intelligence to business leadership. In 1998, in what has become one of HBR's most enduring articles, "[What Makes a Leader](#)," he states unequivocally:

The most effective leaders are all alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of what has come to be known as emotional intelligence. It's not that IQ and technical skills are irrelevant. They do matter, but...they are the entry-level requirements for executive positions. My research, along with other recent studies, clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader.

The article then goes on to introduce five components of emotional intelligence that allow individuals to recognize, connect with, and learn from their own and other people's mental states:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Motivation (defined as "a passion for work that goes beyond money and status")
- Empathy for others
- Social skills, such as proficiency in managing relationships and building networks

An understanding of what exactly constitutes emotional intelligence is important not only because the capacity is so central to leadership but because people strong in some of its elements can be utterly lacking in others, sometimes to disastrous effect. [You can see Salovey](#), now Yale's provost, making this point vividly in a talk he gave at a 2010 leadership conference in which he describes how a single picture (which we can't even see) illustrates the remarkable disparity in the emotional intelligence of President Clinton, who was so remarkable in his empathy and yet so devoid of self-control.

In subsequent work, Goleman focuses more deeply on these various elements of emotional intelligence. In 2001, with Case Western Reserve professor Richard Boyatzis and U.Penn faculty member Annie McKee, he explored the contagious nature of emotions at work, and the link between leaders' emotional states and their companies' financial success in "[Primal Leadership](#)." In 2008, in "[Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership](#)," Goleman and Boyatzis take a closer look at the mechanisms of social intelligence (the wellsprings of empathy and social skills). And most recently, in "[The Focused Leader](#)," Goleman applies advances in neuroscience research to explain how leaders can increase each element of emotional intelligence by understanding and improving the various ways they focus their attention, both expansively and narrowly.

It is perhaps an indication of how young this field is (or perhaps how fundamental Goleman's typology is to it) that pretty much the entire canon of thinking on the subject in HBR also focuses on one or another of these elements of emotional intelligence as Goleman laid them out.

In "[Cultural Intelligence](#)," for instance, Elaine Mosakowski of the University of Colorado, Boulder, and LBS professor Christopher Earley take an in-depth look at one important social skill, the ability to adjust to different contexts, offering a diagnostic to help you gauge your abilities and a six-step process for improving them. In "[Contextual Intelligence](#)," HBS professor Tarun Khanna examines how leaders develop what Goleman calls "cognitive empathy," the aspect of social intelligence that "enables leaders to pick up implied norms and learn the unique mental models of a new culture." In [Emotional Agility](#), consultants Susan David and Christina Congleton, focus on one aspect of self-regulation, detailing a process for recognizing and rechanneling your negative emotions, an idea echoed in Kellogg school professor Leigh Thompson and U. Chicago behavioral science professor Tanya Menon's approach to coping with [envy at work](#). And in "[Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups](#)," Steven Wolff of Marist College, and another CWR professor, Vanessa Urch Druskat, examine how emotional intelligence is manifested in and strengthens teams.

The year that Mayer and Salovey coined the term *emotional intelligence* was the same year functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) was invented, making it possible for the first time to see what was happening in the brain while it was in action. Goleman's work is infused with these insights, and HBR has reported on the most surprising research in this area, particularly in the last five years:

- on the mechanisms of [charisma](#),
- on what's happening at a physical level [when you understand what another person is saying](#),
- on when [emotional reasoning trumps IQ](#),
- (and conversely [when anger poisons decision making](#));
- on when [flattery works and when it doesn't](#),
- and on the [merits of gossip](#) in fostering social networks.

And just this month, HBR's editors reported on the [strong link between empathetic leaders and financial performance](#). Collectively they form an impressive and growing body of evidence suggesting the integrated nature of our rational and emotional selves and the impossibility and inadvisability of separating the two at work.

Still, it is sign that the field is reaching a certain level of maturity that we are beginning to see some counterarguments. Most notably, a Wharton professor, [Adam Grant](#), who in his own research has reported [a lack of correlation between scores on tests of emotional intelligence and business results](#). While Goleman and others [contest his methods](#), Mayer himself pointed out in 2002 HBR article that "emotional intelligence isn't the only way to attain success as a leader. A brilliant strategist who can maximize profits may be able to hire and keep talented employees even if he or she doesn't have strong personal connections with them." But building those strong connections is still [probably a safer bet](#) than ignoring them.

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