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# How to Improve Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

The World Economic Forum ranked emotional intelligence as one of the top 10 most important workplace skills for 2020.

By increasing empathy and compassion through accurate awareness and acceptance of emotions, widespread change can be ignited throughout organizations via leadership and company culture.

If you've heard a lot about emotional intelligence but you're not sure what the hype is about, or if you know what it is but don't know how to apply it within the workplace, you've come to the right place.

In this booklet, we'll define emotional intelligence in the context of the workplace, describe its components, explore its relationship in the workplace, and look at how to improve it for both individual employees and the organization as a whole.

## What is Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace? (Definition + Concept)

First, let's get a baseline on what emotional intelligence is. Emotional intelligence (shortened to EI or EQ for emotional quotient) can be defined as:

*"someone's ability to perceive, understand and manage their own feelings and emotions" (Chignell, 2018).*

Further, there are five distinct components of EI:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-regulation
3. Internal (or intrinsic) motivation
4. Empathy
5. Social skills

From a glance at these components, it's easy to see how EI applies in the workplace. Workers with higher self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and social skills have an advantage over those with less. We'll go over some of the reasons why this is so later.

### 1. Daniel Goleman on EI in the Workplace

EI was first defined and established as a construct in psychology back in the 1990s, but interest in it has grown exponentially since then-especially in its application in the workplace. Emotional intelligence expert Daniel Goleman shares his view on why there is so much interest on EI/EQ in the workplace:

*"The interest in emotional intelligence in the workplace stems from the widespread recognition that these abilities – self-awareness, self-management, empathy and social skill – separate the most successful workers and leaders from the average. This is especially true in roles like the professions and higher level executives, where everyone is about as smart as everyone else, and how people manage themselves and their relationships gives the best and edge." (Goleman, 2012).*

### 2. Why is Developing EQ Important in the Workplace?

Emotional intelligence is a vital consideration in the workplace for many reasons, but there are two that really stick out:

1. It is linked to higher job satisfaction for those with high EI/EQ as well as employees who work with or are managed by those with high EI/EQ.
2. It is strongly associated with job performance.

### 3. A Look at Emotional Intelligence and Job Satisfaction

It's well-known that emotional intelligence is related to job satisfaction. Employees who are high in EI/EQ also tend to be higher in job satisfaction, as many studies have shown:

- Çekmecelioğlu and colleagues studied nearly 150 call center employees in Istanbul and found a significant positive relationship between EI/EQ and internal job satisfaction (2012).
- Similarly, high EI/EQ (specifically high self-awareness) is negatively related to burnout and positively related to job satisfaction in people who work in the public sector (Lee, 2017).
- Ghanaian nurses who were higher in emotional intelligence also enjoyed higher job satisfaction (Tagoe & Quarshie, 2017).

### 4. How can Emotional Intelligence Improve Job Performance?

In addition to contributing to greater happiness and satisfaction in employees, higher emotional intelligence also contributes to better job performance.

- Researchers found that emotional intelligence training boosted employee productivity and resulted in better evaluations from management (Hosseinian et al., 2008).
- Teachers with higher emotional intelligence also generally perform better in their jobs (Mohamad & Jais, 2016).
- A 2017 study by Pekaar and colleagues showed that emotional intelligence is significantly correlated with job performance, particularly the EI/EQ components of recognizing and managing the emotions of the self and others.

Emotional intelligence has an impact on job performance through these seven key traits and characteristics:

1. Emotional stability (greater ability to manage their own emotions and tolerate stress)
2. Conscientiousness (tendency to be diligent, hardworking, control impulses)
3. Extraversion (personality trait that makes people more open and better at establishing relationships with others)
4. Ability EI (individuals' ability to perform emotion-related behaviors, like expressing emotions, empathizing with others, and combine emotion with reasoning)
5. Cognitive ability (IQ; studies suggest there is at least some overlap between the IQ and EQ)
6. General self-efficacy (confidence in the ability to cope with the demands of our job)
7. Self-rated job performance (Bailey, 2015).

To get a better handle on understanding the importance of emotional intelligence, let's move on to some examples of emotional intelligence at work.

## 7 Examples of High and Low EQ at Work

We know that high EI/EQ in the workplace is an advantage, but how do we know it when we see it? What does it look like?

Here are some good examples of high vs. low EI/EQ at work from emotional intelligence coach Ush Dhanak:

### 1. An Upset Employee Finds a Compassionate Ear

We all get moody sometimes, even at work. How a person deals with her coworkers or employees when they are having a bad day is a good indication about her EI/EQ level.

If she doesn't even notice the moodiness, ignores the employee, exacerbates the bad mood, or criticizes the employee and tells them to "snap out of it," she probably has low EI/EQ. If, on the other hand, she notices that something's up, offers her employee compassion and understanding, and tries to cheer the employee up or distract them from their woes, that's a great indicator that she has high EI/EQ.

### 2. People Listen to Each Other in Meetings

Unfortunately, not all meetings are positive and productive; sometimes meetings can devolve into everyone talking at once, no one offering any input at all, or-worst of all-shouting and heated arguments.

If an employee contributes to any of the above in a meeting, he is displaying low emotional intelligence. If he allows others to have their say, listens attentively and refrains from interrupting others, and gently but effectively keeps everyone on task, he is probably high in EI/EQ.


### 3. People Express Themselves Openly

A person who is comfortable speaking up about things that are important, and is just as comfortable listening to others talk about their own opinions, is showing high workplace EI/EQ. She is probably also adept at expressing her own emotions in an appropriate way and accepting of others who express their own emotions.

A person who keeps things bottled up or gets upset when others disagree with her at work is likely low in emotional intelligence. She might spar with her coworkers about their opinions or-conversely-expect everyone to simply keep all emotions and opinions to themselves.

### 4. Most Change Initiatives Work

If a workplace is generally high in emotional intelligence, it likely handles change well. Change initiatives are probably taken seriously and carried out in earnest.



On the flip side, workplaces with low emotional intelligence are resistant to change, fail to put in the effort necessary to make change initiatives succeed, or even actively sabotage them. Additionally, poorly thought-out initiatives indicate that the management team is low in EI/EQ and does not understand how their proposed changes will affect their employees.

## **5. Flexibility**

A workplace that offers flexibility and understanding of the complex, busy lives of organization members is one that is probably high in EI/EQ. Managers and executives who accept that people have differing needs and offer ways to work smarter are displaying a good sense of emotional intelligence.

Managers and executives who refuse to allow their employees flexibility and hold strictly to the way things have always been done (when there is no need to do so) are showing signs of low emotional intelligence.

## **6. People Have the Freedom to Be Creative**

Similarly, workplaces that allow their employees the opportunity to be creative and innovative are high in EI/EQ. Giving people the chance to practice their creativity and think outside the box is not only a welcome gesture for employees, it's also a smart move for the workplace.

Workplaces that make their employees stick to strict policies and procedures (again, when there is no need for such strictness) are low in EI/EQ. Not understanding the value of creativity and the need employees have to be imaginative and invested in their work is a hallmark of low EI/EQ.

## **7. People Meet Out of Work Time**

Finally, a good sign of emotional intelligence in the workplace is when organization members meet outside of the workplace. Organizations where employees enjoy happy hours, having lunch together, or other social activities indicates that there is a high level of EI/EQ present.

Workplaces that don't feature such strong bonds and those in which employees do not spend any non-working time together are likely low in EI/EQ. When people are emotionally intelligent, they tend to get along and see the value in investing their time and energy into workplace relationships, but people low in EI/EQ are generally not interested in building quality relationships with their peers (Dhanak, n.d.).

## 5 Benefits and Advantages of Using EQ in Business

If you're not already convinced about the benefits of using EI/EQ in the workplace, here are a few more reasons you should pay attention to it!

1. **Motivation**-high EI/EQ translates to better control of our motivation, and perhaps even more motivation for our coworkers!
2. **Common vision**-those high in EI/EQ are able to more effectively understand and communicate with others, which makes it easier to develop and maintain a common team vision.
3. **Change**-highly emotionally intelligent people can handle the stress, uncertainty, and anxiety that comes with working in business.
4. **Communication**-clear communication is a telltale sign of emotional intelligence, and it contributes to better relationships, an easier time getting help from others, and more effective persuasion and influence of others.
5. **Leadership**-self-leadership, leading others, influencing others-all of these are vital for those in business; more on this later (Elite World Hotels, 2018).

## What Happens When There is a Lack of EQ in the Workplace?

Speaking of too little EI/EQ, you might be wondering what a lack of emotional intelligence in the workplace looks like. There are two main ways that a lack of EI/EQ can negatively impact the workplace:

1. Communication
2. Decision Making

### 1. How EQ Impacts Communication in the Workplace

A lack of EI/EQ can negatively impact communication in the workplace through several mechanisms:

- Less understanding of one's own emotions
- Less understanding of the emotions of others
- Less effective communication of ideas and emotions to others
- Inappropriate communication-related behavior, such as outbursts of emotion, oversharing, or failing to communicate important information.

It's easy to see how these mechanisms impact overall communication and, through less effective communication, lower productivity and efficiency in the workplace.

### 2. How Emotional Intelligence Affects Decision Making in the Workplace

Similarly, EI/EQ can have a significant impact on decision-making in the workplace. When emotional intelligence is high, organization members can understand the cause and effect relationship between emotions and events and plan effectively (Côté & Yip, 2013).

When EI/EQ is low, organization members may experience "incidental emotions" surrounding decision-making. For example, anxiety is a common emotion involved in decision-making, especially for big decisions that will have a significant impact. Those low in EI/EQ may not understand the source of their anxiety or how to effectively manage it, leading to too much risk-taking, not enough risk-taking, or judgment clouded by bias (Côté & Yip, 2013).



## How EQ Can be Used to Manage and Address Problems in the Workplace

So we know what a lack or surplus of EI/EQ can do to a workplace, but we still need to consider how emotional intelligence can actually be applied in the workplace.

There are many applications for EI/EQ at work, but there are three interesting areas where emotional intelligence interventions can be especially effective:

- Leadership and management
- Project management
- Social work

### 1. Leading with Emotional Intelligence in Management

Emotional intelligence is perhaps most effective and impactful when applied to leadership and management; higher EI/EQ in leadership has a funny way of starting a trickle-down effect of positivity and efficiency in an organization.

A leader who embodies and practices high EI/EQ can:

1. Communicate their vision more effectively.
2. Improve their persuasion and inspirational speaking abilities.
3. Ensure appropriate responses to stressful and confusing situations at work.
4. Manage their own emotions and the emotions of their employees (to an extent).

All of this leads directly (and indirectly) to a more efficient, effective, and productive workplace.


To learn more about emotional intelligence in leadership and management, see the EI/EQ training resources towards the end of this piece.

### 2. Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers

Emotional intelligence is clearly important for leaders and managers, but don't underestimate its importance in more peer-heavy projects and interactions. Project managers have good reason to pay attention to their EI/EQ levels, and improve them if possible.

To be successful, project managers must be able to...

1. Perceive emotion: ability to recognize, attend to, and understand one's own emotions and others' emotions.
2. Manage emotion: ability to effectively manage, control, and express emotions.
3. Decision-making: ability to appropriately apply emotion to manage and solve problems.
4. Achieve: the best motivation to achieve is inner or intrinsic motivation.
5. Influence: ability to recognize, manage, and evoke emotions in others (Davey-Winter, n.d.).



As you might have guessed, higher emotional intelligence is characterized by these five abilities! High EI/EQ is a must-have for project managers.

To learn more about emotional intelligence in leadership and management, see the EI/EQ training resources towards the end of this booklet.

### **3. Using Emotional Intelligence in Social Work**

Emotional intelligence is especially important to apply in social work. Social workers have some of the most difficult situations, challenging interactions, and heavy emotional labor of all professions.

EI/EQ can be applied to improve one's skills and abilities in five core social work tasks:

1. Engagement of users/clients
2. Assessment and observation
3. Decision making
4. Collaboration and cooperation
5. Dealing with stress (Morrison, 2007)

Improvements in these five tasks will not only allow the social worker to work more effectively, but will also improve their clients' experience and help the social worker feel more positive, fulfilled, and satisfied with their job (Morrison, 2007).

## 18 Tips for Teaching and Applying EQ in the Workplace

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### 18 Tips for Teaching and Applying EQ in the Workplace

Kendra Cherry at Very Well Mind has some great practical tips for boosting your own emotional intelligence and teaching your staff to boost their as well. She suggests:

- **Becoming more self-aware**  
Pay attention to how you are feeling throughout your day and noticing how your emotions contribute to your decisions and actions.  
Identify and understand your emotional strengths and weaknesses.  
Understand that emotions can be fleeting and easily changed.
- **Practicing self-regulation**  
Find techniques that help you deal with your work-related stress, like hobbies, exercise, meditation, etc.  
Try to accept reality and keep a cool head when work gets crazy.  
Give yourself time to think and plan before making decisions-especially big decisions.
- **Improving your social skills**  
Listen actively and attentively to your managers, coworkers, and peers.  
Keep an eye out for nonverbal communication.  
Work on your persuasion and influencing skills.  
gossip, but step in to handle conflict when appropriate and necessary.
- **Becoming more empathetic**  
Put yourself in their shoes-at work and in your personal life.  
Pay attention to your own responses to others.
- **Working on your motivation**  
Focus on what you love about your job rather than what you hate about it.  
Try to maintain a positive, optimistic attitude (Cherry, 2018).

## Using EI in HR (Human Resources)

HR is one of the most effective places to apply what we know about emotional intelligence. Besides contributing to better communication, relationships, and problem-solving among current employees, emotional intelligence can also help you to identify the best candidates for positions within the organization.

Read on to learn how.

### 1. Using Emotional Intelligence Interview Questions

Emotional intelligence interview questions can be extremely helpful in narrowing down your pool of applicants, especially if you have a lot of applicants with similarly impressive qualifications.

However, make sure you don't just jump in and come up with your own ways to assess emotional intelligence; follow these guidelines to make sure you're doing it the right way.

Don't:

- Use personality tests as a proxy for EI; many of the EI/EQ measures are designed to measure emotional intelligence as a facet of personality rather than an indicator of work habits, competencies, and skills. They may not measure specific components of emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, positive outlook, achievement orientation, empathy, or inspirational leadership.
- Use a self-report test (i.e., a test in which your candidates answer questions and report on their own emotional intelligence. This doesn't really work for two reasons: (1) if a person is not self-aware, they possibly aren't going to be able to accurately assess their own emotional intelligence, and (2) if they are self-aware, you could be giving them the opportunity to exaggerate their skills or abilities and make themselves seem like a better candidate than they really are.
- Use a 360-degree feedback instrument-even if it is a good measure of EI competencies. A tool like 360-degree feedback is best used for development and improvement in current employees rather than evaluation and hiring. When these instruments are used to evaluate, some people "game" them by carefully selecting the respondents and even instructing them how to answer the questions.

Do:

- Get references for the candidate-and actually call them! Letters of reference don't cut it when it comes to gauging a candidate's EI/EQ, because they are carefully prepared, static, and usually pretty general. When you get the chance to speak with a candidate's references, you can ask them questions that really get to the heart of EI/EQ and its subcomponents and competencies. Get as many examples as you can and press for details. Above all, be sure to ask for examples of how your candidate treats other people.

- Interview for emotional intelligence. This might sound easy or like it's something you are already doing, but chances are you aren't actually assessing EI/EQ. In interviews that aren't strictly structured, we usually let people be vague in their responses-even to the point of not really answering the question-and we often fail to ask good follow-up questions. Even when we ask candidates directly about emotional intelligence or EI-related competencies, they generally provide us with a picture of an idealized version of themselves rather than an accurate portrait of their real selves. To overcome these obstacles to getting a good handle on your candidates' EI/EQ, behavioral event interviewing is the way to go (McKee, 2016).

Behavioral event interviewing is a method that allows you to see their EI/EQ competencies almost firsthand.

Annie McKee from the Harvard Business Review explains how to do it:

1. Start the interview off on the right foot; make it as warm, friendly, and comfortable as possible. This will help you get the candidate in a frame of mind conducive to sharing the information you want to get.
2. Ask a few traditional questions about the candidate's experience, background, and education.
3. Next, ask the candidate about a recent situation where she and some of her peers (coworkers, teammates, etc.) faced a difficult challenge that needed solving, and encourage her to pick one where she's the "protagonist" of the story and one where she was ultimately successful and/or proud of her solution.
4. Ask her to tell the story in a few brief sentences first. Once you have the outline, have her go over the story in detail and ask her specific, detailed questions about it (e.g., what she thought at a certain point, how she felt about what happened, what she did about it).
5. Ask her to share a similar story except this time it should be about a time when she failed and learned a valuable lesson. Again, have her give a brief overview then go more in-depth, and ask detailed questions.
6. Finally, end on a positive note-ask for another positive story.

This technique will give you insight into your candidate's thought processes, her awareness of her own emotions, how she thinks and feels about others, what she does during a conflict, and how she handles disagreements and challenges with other people (McKee, 2016).

You may not be great at this method right away, but practice makes perfect!

## 2. 25 Emotional Intelligence Interview Questions

There are tons of good questions you can ask to gauge emotional intelligence. These six were identified by Karla Cook, editor and team manager at HubSpot Marketing, as some of the best ones to get an indicator of EI/EQ:

1. Can you tell me about a time you tried to do something and failed?
2. Tell me about a time you received negative feedback from your boss. How did that make you feel?
3. Can you tell me about a conflict at work that made you feel frustrated?
4. Tell me about a hobby you like to do outside of work. Can you teach me about it?
5. What would your co-workers say is the most rewarding thing about working with you? What about the most challenging thing?
6. Can you tell me about a time you needed to ask for help on a project? (Cook, 2017).

These six questions offer you some great opportunities to learn about your candidates EI/EQ, but if you need even more suggestions, check out the list below from Alison Doyle at The Balance Careers:

- What is one of your weaknesses? How do you overcome that weakness?
- What motivates you to do your work?
- Describe a stressful work situation you've had. How did you resolve that situation?
- What are one or two things that make you angry or frustrated at work? What do you do when you get angry or frustrated at work?
- Tell me about a time when you received feedback on your performance, and you disagreed with the feedback. How did you handle the situation?
- Tell me about a setback you had at work. How did you handle it?
- Describe a time when you made a big mistake at work. How did you handle the situation?
- Tell me about a time when you had to handle multiple work assignments at once. How did you feel? How did you handle the situation?
- Tell me about a time when you took on a task at work that was new to you. How did you feel doing it?
- How would you handle a coworker who consistently does not pull his weight on group assignments?
- How do your colleagues benefit from working with you?
- Tell me about a time when you did or said something that had a positive impact on an employee, coworker, or customer.
- Have you ever noticed that someone at work was having a bad day? How did you know? What did you do?
- Tell me about a time when you had a dispute with a colleague. What did you do to deal with the situation?

- Describe a time when a colleague came to you with a problem. How did you respond?
- Tell me about a time when understanding someone else's perspective helped you accomplish a task or resolve an issue.
- Tell me about a time when you motivated someone to accomplish a task. How did you motivate him or her?
- Why is it important to develop a rapport with your colleagues?
- How do you build a rapport with your colleagues? (Doyle, 2018).

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