

Publish: September 2015

Title: *Back to School: A Primer on Emotional Intelligence and Perception*

While the summer passed us by like a wave, it was the sight of the school bus that had us quickly back on our toes.

And, with the sight of that school bus came great anticipation, and apprehension, as our eldest started kindergarten this month. We spent countless hours preparing her for the transition, talking about her new class, reading books about kindergarten, and picking out the best school supplies Wal-Mart had to offer. Yet, it was not until hindsight presented itself, that I realized a key piece of the puzzle was missing. In this case, I was so focused on the process itself that I neglected to consider the emotional impact of the transition. Each of us, in our own way, was experiencing (and addressing) the exact same change in very different ways.

As with organizations, operating within constantly shifting environments, most leaders are quick to focus on the task at hand. We see the goalpost, and run for it. However, in the case of leading both strategically and authentically, it is also critical that we consider how we are leading from a 360-perspective. In other words, our stakeholders matter...and their perception of how we lead matters even more.

In a previous organization, long before the discussion of emotional intelligence was embedded in our nomenclature, I met with a leader to provide coaching on a recent feedback report. The organization was going through tremendous change, largely related to external market forces, and this was a tenured leader with a long record of positive performance. However, in this case, his feedback indicated a number of operational incidents that could have readily been avoided with proper upfront clarity to the team.

The discussion was immediately met with: "I am very surprised to see this detail. This is not how I expected our feedback meeting to go." He was initially taken aback, and ultimately frustrated. "But, they seemed so engaged? We just had an offsite, everyone seemed so happy." Happiness at an offsite is one thing, but having a keen understanding of your key stakeholders, and their perception, is altogether different. With that, I asked him to list out his key stakeholders...he had a list as long as my arm. However, interestingly, his team was nowhere to be found on that list. And, that spoke volumes in terms of his self-awareness/relationship management focus.

As a Leadership/Organizational Development practitioner, the goal will always be for the root cause of any leadership complexity to present itself organically. In this case, the leadership dilemma presented itself in bold/flashing lights. What this leader *thought* he knew about his team, how he *thought* he was leading, what he *thought* he was communicating, and to whom...was through one lens. A lens of one does not reveal the views of all. And, from a leadership perspective, a myopic view is more likely to present a skewed reality.

The majority of leaders come to the table with the best of intentions. However, it's not until we take a look around (and gather feedback) that our self-perception is either validated or disproved. In other words, we typically lead with only one lens...our own. Thus, absent of being aware of competencies related to emotional intelligence, leaders may find themselves frustrated with feedback such as in the example above.

Additionally, the higher the level of leadership, the more crucial emotional intelligence becomes. Decades of research tells us that emotional intelligence often trumps IQ in terms of leadership effectiveness. Thus, we are seeing less focus on technical skills in the workplace and more focus on competencies related to how we work together, communicate with each other, and manage change.

While there is an industry of data, and literature regarding emotional intelligence, the basics are derived from Daniel Goleman's work, narrowed down to 4 key competencies, or emotional intelligence (EQ) clusters, of which sub-competencies exist. For the purposes of this brief column, the basics are as follows (*see supporting tool A for additional detail):

1. **Self-Awareness: Recognizing and understanding our own emotions.** This cluster reflects the ability to read and understand your emotions; as well as recognize their impact on work performance, relationships, and the like.
2. **Self-Management: Effectively managing our own emotions.** This cluster reflects the ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses under control. While also adjusting to changing situations, overcoming obstacles and seizing opportunities along the way. These 'opportunities' may not always be comfortable.
3. **Social-Awareness: Recognizing and understanding the emotions of others.** This cluster reflects the ability to sense other people's emotions, understand their perspective, and take an active interest in their concern/s. Additionally, and critically important, it reflects the ability to read the currents of organizational life, build decision networks, and navigate politics.
4. **Relationship Management** (*previously termed: 'social skill'): **Applying emotional understanding in our dealings with others.** This cluster reflects interpersonal communication skills. It's all about your ability to get the best out of others ... your ability to inspire and influence, communicate and build bonds with those around you, and your ability to help them change, grow, develop, and resolve conflict independently.

If we were to apply the Goleman's EQ clusters to the scenario above, the immediate concern is a lack social awareness and relationship management regarding his team. This leader was a high performer, and highly regarded by his peers. However, that alone won't steer the ship and the team had a much different view. Thus, in this case, operational incidents and communication missteps occurred along the way. The team offsite may have been 'fun', but the 360 feedback indicated a much different tale. Perception matters. Stakeholders matter. And, the perception of those stakeholders is invaluable.

For this month's article on Leadership, I encourage you to consider the following supporting tools:

1. **See the attached EQ primer** (*supporting tool A).
2. **See the attached questionnaire regarding leadership presence** (*supporting tool B).
Absent of a full 360, aligned with Goleman's EQ focus areas, this exercise will serve you well as an informal check-in from key stakeholders within your team or organization. One's leadership presence is shaped by many factors, including the perception of those around you. Find time for an informal chat, with a few folks who impact you each day. Consider adding in a few questions specifically aligned with the clusters addressed above, and be sure to revisit the feedback over time.

Once you review the feedback, ask yourself...is your leadership presence aligned with your perception? Are you asking the correct stakeholders for feedback? How does the feedback align with Goleman's emotional intelligence factors?

Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions. No matter what leaders set out to do—whether it's creating strategy or mobilizing teams to action—their success depends on how they do it. Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should. (Goleman 2005)

As in my case, I thought I was managing a significant family-based change remarkably well. However, as only a loving husband can suggest, I soon learned that my intentions did not match my actions. I was so focused on managing the process from the lens of one...that I neglected to take stock of the emotional impact of this transition for all. Ultimately, our little one put on that new backpack, and made it to the bus that day. And, we all took a moment to exhale when we saw her exuberant wave and tremendous smile as the bus took off for school.