Learning to display Emotional Intelligence

Serge Sardo argues that recent research in Australia demonstrates that Emotional Intelligence is not simply an ingrained trait but can be taught.

Published in 1995, Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* remains one of the most widely read social science books in the world. The continued fascination with Emotional Intelligence (EI) goes beyond the fact that if we have only an average IQ we can at least claim that our EI is high. Today, not only can we measure EI we can enhance it as well.

EI is an attractive concept because it encapsulates the most powerful of human abilities that IQ misses – the ability to understand how our emotions impact on ourselves and on others.

US psychologists John Mayer and Peter Salovey first coined the term in 1990. After more than 10 years of further research they define EI as “an ability to recognise the meanings of emotions and their relationships, and to reason and problem-solve on the basis of them”. They further state that EI is involved in the capacity to perceive emotions, assimilate emotion-related feelings, understand the information of those emotions and manage them.

Such concepts have been around since Freud began his work on dreams but recent research conducted in Australia now provides us with the ability to measure, and most importantly, develop our EI as individuals and as teams.

**Jumping on the bandwagon**

The corporate world was quick to embrace EI. Goleman’s article “What makes a leader?” (*Harvard Business Review*, November/December 1998) became the most requested reprint of the last 40 years. Corporate enthusiasm made best-sellers of two more Goleman books on the subject of EI in the workplace.
The fascination for organisations was simple: EI appeared to explain that certain something about people that made them effective, extending the definition of “effective” beyond technical brilliance or business acumen. EI seemed to explain how some people had a knack for establishing and maintaining high-level working relationships and through these relationships be effective leaders. And yet a precise articulation or measurement of that “certain something” remained elusive.

Throughout the 1990s research studies began to uncover the effects of work relationships on productivity. In 1997 a UK study that became known as the Sheffield Effectiveness Study found that the human relationship factor of an organisational culture contributed more to productivity than any other factor including financial management.

Similarly, the value sets of people generically labelled as “Generation Xers” (born between 1963 and 1980) are probably a contributing factor to the shift towards a more people-centric style of leadership. Studies focusing on the needs and drivers of Generation X have consistently found that one of their single strongest workplace motivators is the relationship they have with their managers and colleagues. EI would seem to be the logical framework to help build these relationships.

**Can you prove it?**

Until 2003 there was little tangible evidence to back up the many claims about the benefits of an emotionally intelligent workforce. Most claims about EI were only loosely substantiated.

In 2002, an Australian consulting company, Learning Dimensions, set out to determine what tangible commercial benefits could be achieved from having a workforce that was highly emotionally intelligent.

In partnership with Swinburne University, Learning Dimensions used scientifically valid instruments to measure EI and a number of other factors that contributed to workplace performance. The findings, drawn from a study of 80 employees from four organisations in Melbourne, show that people high in emotional intelligence have:

- lower absenteeism from work
- better psychological health
- higher commitment to the organisation
- clearer role boundaries
- higher levels of responsibility for the activities and work performance of direct reports
- are generally more satisfied at work
- more regularly seek support when coping with stressful situations at work.

**But can you develop it?**

The next major challenge was to determine whether EI can actually be developed in employees. Critics of EI argue quite reasonably that you either have it or you don't. Some people appear to have a natural ability to understand and manage emotions well while others struggle. The counter argument supporting the notion that EI can be learned is that, unlike IQ or personality characteristics, in practice most models of EI are competency-based and describe a distinct set of behaviours that can be learned.

These behaviours include how well we express appropriate emotions in the workplace and how well we are able to empathise and be in touch with the emotional states of our employees.

Recent studies do demonstrate that EI can be improved in individuals. This process typically involves an individual assessment and a series of one-on-one coaching sessions.

Until recently the developmental focus of EI has been on individuals in organisations. This can be costly and time consuming, particularly for large leadership teams. Until now, there were no known, cost-effective and proven methodologies of introducing and developing EI in entire workforces. This prompted Learning Dimensions to conduct further research, specifically to answer two questions:

- Can EI be developed using a team approach?
- By improving EI, will leadership capability also improve?

A research study was conducted as part of a leadership development programme for a large multinational manufacturer. The primary objective was to develop the leadership capability of a team using a competency-based training programme. The team consisted of 30 middle-level managers, most from engineering and technical backgrounds.

Prior to the start of the learning and development component of the programme the leadership capability of each individual and the team as a whole was measured using the Bass and Avolio Transformational Leadership Model that assesses five distinct transformational leadership characteristics.

With the underlying assumption that by improving levels of EI, leadership capability will also improve, the team's level of EI was also measured using the Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test (SUEIT). This test measures five distinct EI competencies and became the basis of the learning and development process.
Once EI and transformational leadership levels were obtained the team embarked on an eight-month, six-module development process. The modules aimed to improve participants’ leadership abilities by developing EI competencies.

After completing the modules the team members and the team as a whole were re-assessed for levels of EI and transformational leadership competency. As Figure 1 shows, the strength of each of the EI competencies improved approximately 50 per cent following the learning and development process. These results were groundbreaking in that few known studies have demonstrated such an improvement in the EI of an entire team. It was the transformational leadership reassessment results shown in Figure 2, however, that confirmed the original
assumption that by improving levels of EI leadership capability would also improve.

Before the learning and development process, the team scored low on all characteristics of transformational leadership. As Figure 2 shows, post-programme results revealed a marked improvement in scores on all five of these leadership characteristics.

Qualitative evidence strongly supported these findings with internal team members and external stakeholders noticing a marked improvement in how the team functioned. The improvements extended beyond just being nicer with each other – the team’s overall performance was rated as more effective. This included performance indicators such as meeting project deadlines and more effective negotiations with suppliers and other stakeholders.

While the programme certainly aimed at improving individual EI competencies, there was also a strong focus on changing attitudes and establishing new cultural norms regarding EI. This need was identified in the initial assessment phase. Many of the participants were actually competent in displaying EI behaviours but when asked why they avoided displaying these behaviours in the workplace, the response was typically, “it’s not the way we work around here”.

Such a finding illustrates the point that any permanent change in behaviour cannot be achieved just by improving employees’ skill levels. Permanent change in behaviour, especially regarding how we manage our and others’ emotions, can only be achieved by also changing employees’ beliefs regarding emotional management – something this programme specifically targeted.

No more excuses

Thanks to this research we can now be confident that emotionally intelligent workforces have distinct commercial benefits for organisations. Whether it is dealing with each other or with clients or customers, a workforce in touch with the emotional world of others is more able to achieve organisational outcomes through high-level workplace relationships.

Imagine a leadership team that can consistently inspire and motivate people to perform at optimum levels. Or a sales force that is extremely competent in empathising with clients and managing their own personal disappointments and stresses effectively. Or a customer service team with an uncanny knack of calming and engaging their customers.

The ever-mounting evidence on EI strongly suggests this is all possible. More importantly, EI developmental methodologies are now available and cost-effective, with the emphasis on not just learning a new skill, but dramatically changing the way we work around here.

Serge Sardo (serge.s@learningdimensions.com.au) is an organisational psychologist working as a senior consultant with Learning Dimensions in the area of leadership development and cultural change.