

# Emotional Intelligence and Leadership: the magic of sustainable business success

By Alison Boothby

***Emotional Intelligence (EI or EQ) is receiving significant attention at the moment in the field of leadership development and communication with as many as 85% of the world's top 500 organisations allegedly claiming it is an essential leadership skill and the single most important factor in predicting success.***

At the Charlotte Street Hotel this week, [Comma Partners](http://www.commapartners.com) brought together some 30 heavyweight communication professionals to share their thoughts and experiences around introducing EI as a part of their leadership communications strategy .

“Despite the high awareness of the importance - if not the value - of EI, it is interesting that we are still not seeing much evidence of it in corporate life” observes Kate Hogben, an independent internal and change communications consultant with an impressive list of FTSE clients under her belt. One reason for this might be that it is still seen as a ‘soft skill’ or perhaps an inherent rather than an acquired skill, and lacks a body of hard data and evidence to get it to most top tables. As Hogben continues: ““Until we can shift the perception of EI as being less about getting along and more about being smart with emotions (as a way of influencing business outcomes ) it will remain tough to move the needle - but that’s our challenge.” Rebecca Hilliard formerly the global manager for internal communications at Shell, entirely agrees: “From my experience, it’s about finding the right moment which will depend upon the business situation. When there’s a burning platform and leaders are looking for ‘the thing’ to help them connect with their colleagues, that’s the opportunity to bring it in.”

## **EI as an engagement technique**

Lisa Cornell-Norman of Teynham Associates who presented at the event is currently leading the engagement piece of a transformation programme at Eurostar. Having introduced EI capabilities to several organisations to date she suggests that, “Working it in through the engagement agenda is a good place to start. Leadership teams are already comfortably familiar with the benefits of enhanced employee engagement and EI, when broken down into component parts, offers a set of capabilities that can be easily understood.”



Daniel Goleman's published best seller "Emotional Intelligence" has done a great deal to popularise the concept and breaks it down into five easily understood capabilities, and it is this model that Cornell-Norman makes use of in her work:

**Self-awareness** – emotions, strengths and weaknesses, impacts

**Self regulation** – redirecting disruptive emotions and adapt to changing circumstances

**Social skills** – managing people to move in the right direction

**Empathy** – considering other people's feelings especially when making decisions

**Motivation** – driven to achieve and driving others

### **Communication impact**

So, what does this mean for communicators? For freelance IC consultant Karen Griffiths, it raises some serious questions: "As communicators our role is evolving. The old days of managing the message are gone. Our roles, now a little blurred, are entwined with colleagues in HR, PR, Marketing and Engagement. And this means our credibility is at stake unless we embrace communication in its entirety, learning more about the psychology behind it along the way. We must support our leadership teams to deliver effective messages, no longer through crafting and drafting, but through actions, verbal and non verbal language, our understanding of leadership styles and the science of human interaction. We are too often criticised for being 'pink and fluffy' and it's our job to ensure that we are in tune with how our organisations communicate to retain our credibility with leadership."

Virginia Hicks of [Comma Partners](#) is inclined to agree: "The role of a senior internal communicator is much more about influencing and coaching their senior teams to be able to really connect with their colleagues across the business. There's no doubt in my mind that to be a good practitioner today our own EI must be very high to start with."

By focussing only on our leaders, aren't we missing the point? Gareth Morris, an interim internal communications manager thinks so: "I'm concerned that we are taking a scalpel-like approach to leaders and managers, when we should be going down a more holistic route for organisations. We spend 240 days a year at work and we all go through the entire gamut of emotions from hatred, anger, frustration, boredom, excitement and perhaps even something approaching love. Work is an emotional experience and we need everyone to get on board with this sort of training."

Few would disagree with Morris, but unless the leadership are on board and exhibiting the right communication behaviours, the organisation will not reach its full potential. Having the ability to understand and influence how and why people at work are feeling the way they do, amidst the changing and highly fluid state of the modern corporate world is vital for business leaders if they are to successfully steer their organisation through periods of substantial change.



## **EI and change**

Cornell-Norman goes a step further: “Change programmes are doomed to fail unless emotional transition is achieved and this does involve everyone in the organisation. It demands time and commitment from leaders and a new kind of business conversation within a climate of trust.”

Hogben picks up this point: “In my experience, and especially during periods of intense change, leaders with high EI are not just visible; they are vocal. They invite conversations about purpose and vision in authentic and informal ways. Gone are the days where they rely on their communication team to provide a script.”

## **Social media**

The leaders that Hogben refers to are steps ahead as social media platforms continue to permeate business. Hilliard explains: “Our leaders are increasingly exposed to their colleagues who in the past they may not have had direct contact with. The discussions they enter into now, and how they take part in them, will distinguish them as authentic, credible leaders or not, and this is where EI will really play out. Not only do they need to gear up for a faster pace of discussion, but they need the ability to react swiftly, appropriately and publicly in a way that fosters conversation and demonstrates understanding of the issues raised.”

We know the greatest challenges in the workplace are seldom technical; they tend to be interpersonal. Much evidence exists that tells us quite clearly what people most want from their working relationships: to be valued; to have clear and consistent expectations of the relationship; to be really heard – not just listened to and to be supported in their desire to grow.

## **Good news**

It doesn't take much to realise that a manager or leader who doesn't feel a responsibility toward others, can't handle stress, is unaware of their own emotions, does not see nor understand their impact on others, lacks the ability to understand others or erupts into anger easily is likely to derail their own career and damage the organisation around them. The good news is that the emotional intelligence capabilities required for high performing managers and leaders can be learnt and nurtured – and that's an area we should be influencing as professional communicators.

*Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit [www.commapartners.com](http://www.commapartners.com).*

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