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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Emotional Intelligence: Why You Need It, and How You Can Increase It

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“In a high-IQ job pool, soft skills like discipline, drive and empathy mark those who emerge as outstanding.”

—Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*

Actuaries are highly intelligent people. We all know this to be true. Beyond simply possessing an impressive IQ, however, emotional intelligence (EI or EQ) is also essential to success and harmony in the workplace.

Often thought of very generally as “people skills,” EQ can be more precisely defined as one’s ability to be aware of, regulate, and express his/her emotions while also displaying empathy and social skills. Unlike IQ, which remains relatively stable over the course of one’s life, EQ—thankfully—can improve and evolve over time if we have the interest and intent. Given the fact that 90 percent of high performers at the workplace possess high EQ while 80 percent of low performers have low EQ (according to Talent Smart), we can all stand to push ourselves a bit in order to impel this growth.

HOW TO INCREASE EQ

Learn to Manage Your Negative Emotions

We can likely all recall particularly “bad days” in our own lives, and the domino effect that can begin with one unfortunate event feeding into others as we become overwhelmed with negative thoughts and resulting clouded judgment. Luckily, we have the power to change how we feel about a situation by changing our perception of it.

There are several ways in which we can teach ourselves to reduce these negative feelings:

- **Decrease fear of rejection.** Rather than view things as being simply black and white, you can instead push yourself to consider multiple options and alternatives for each scenario. In doing so, you give yourself not just a Plan A, but also Plans B and C (and maybe even D) and therefore a higher chance of a positive outcome.

For example: Say you are looking for a new job. Rather than simply believing “If I don’t get my first choice, I must not be

a valuable candidate,” take a step back and approach the situation with the mentality that you are applying for a handful of interesting positions, any of which you would be excited to fill. If one does not work out, you still have other viable options.

- **Decrease negative personalization.** This technique largely involves taking a breath and stopping yourself from immediately assuming the worst. When you have a negative reaction to someone’s behavior, try to consider the situation from alternative perspectives, just as in the earlier example. Instead of assuming your boss is being short with you because he is angry with or does not like you, entertain the possibility that he is having a bad day, or that his boss just reprimanded him for something completely unrelated. By allowing alternative explanations rather than personalizing others’ behavior, we simultaneously reduce misunderstandings and practice empathy.

Remain Calm Under Pressure

Imagine you are about to head into an interview, or give a presentation to company stakeholders or a very picky client. Are you sweating yet? (I am!) Luckily, there are a few tricks you can use to help decrease your anxiety (and blood pressure) and put yourself in a position to be collected and capable rather than reactive and on-edge.

- **Cognitive approach.** Instead of fixating on your nervousness and trying to deny it or cast it off, conceptualize your fear as excitement: “I’m not nervous; I am just excited.” While this may sound like touchy-feely fluff, it’s actually science! Harvard Business School psychologist Alison Wood Brooks discovered through a series of experiments that when people shift from a “threat mindset” to an “opportunity mindset,” this in turn shifts their anxiety to excitement and their performance improves.
- **Physical approach.** You can also simply move your body in order to calm your mind. Take a short walk; do some breathing exercises; do a few jumping jacks (in private, please). Some simple movement can help to channel your

- 90 percent of top performers have high EQ.
- EQ is responsible for 58 percent of your job performance.
- People with high EQ make \$29,000 more annually than their low-EQ counterparts.

Source: www.talentsmart.com



energy into a more positive direction, and you can literally work out your nerves.

Speak Openly and Confidently

Having EQ and empathy does not mean you must allow yourself to be a doormat. We all have the right—and at times, the need—to respectfully disagree with others, and to set appropriate boundaries. It is okay to be assertive and to practice self-preservation. Situations that require us to express difficult emotions can naturally evoke tension, but approaching them constructively can help immensely.

For example, rather than making a you-focused statement, it is more helpful and better received to make an I-focused statement in the format of “I feel (blank) when you (blank) because (blank).”

Consider: “You need to complete your work on time” versus “I feel stressed when you hand in your work late because we may not meet the deadline.”

You-focused language can often be construed as blaming or judgmental, which puts the listener on the defensive and, therefore, less receptive to your message. However, I-focused statements are expressing how you feel in response to an action, with which it is much more difficult to take issue or disagree with.

Reduce Reactivity

No matter how hard we try, there will always be that “one person” in your life whom you find to be difficult. Whatever the

reason, challenge yourself not to let your “person” affect you negatively and ruin your day.

Here are two methods to counteract aversion and remain positive:

- **Think before you speak.** Reacting in anger almost never ends well. When you are upset with someone, simply try to stop yourself. Take a breath, and give yourself a moment (or several) to calm down enough to approach the person with a clear head and the hope to defuse, rather than exacerbate, the situation.
- **Consider this person’s situation.** Again, this requires flexing your empathy a bit but will almost always help you to be a little calmer and kinder.

“Yes, I find interactions with Jim challenging but it must be difficult for him to _____” (i.e., have such a demanding schedule; deal with his mother’s illness; cope with his partner’s job loss).

By considering the person’s situation, rather than what you assume is his inherent character, you force yourself to remember that this person is human—just like you. Recognize that this person’s behavior is about his own issues. (“It’s not me; it’s you.”) In doing so, you are able to view the situation more objectively and can more easily devise solutions to the problem.

Grow From Adversity

Work is tough sometimes, and life can be tougher. Instead of wallowing in despair and cursing our lot in life, we can choose to find the lessons in our challenges and use them as fuel for personal growth. With every difficult situation you encounter, ask: “What am I able to learn from this? How can I avoid this in the future? How can I use this to redefine my priorities? What else can I do, and how can I do it better?” The right questions yield the best answers, and by asking yourself constructive questions—tough as they may be—you are setting yourself up to better deal with the situation while also facilitating self-improvement.

Connect Positively With Others

Humans do not exist in a vacuum. Part of life and work is creating relationships with and placing trust in others. While often overlooked or taken for granted, simple acts can contribute greatly to the strength and quality of your relationships. These acts can take the form of verbal expressions (such as asking a colleague how his day is going, expressing gratitude for a kind gesture, or even offering an apology), body language (nodding, shaking hands, warm eye contact, hugging, smiling) and behavior (giving a gift or card, doing a favor, offering a drink). By engaging in these positive behaviors, you are communicating that you care about the other person and that you value her presence in your life.

WHY DOES EQ MATTER?

When you think about a colleague or boss you have admired as well as with whom you have good rapport, you may also associate some of the traits we have discussed here: respectful assertiveness, reasonableness, calmness under pressure, and a generally positive demeanor. If you possess well-developed EQ you are more likely to not only be a happier person but also a better employee. When we have supportive relationships with our colleagues, we tend to be more satisfied on the job and, therefore, produce better quality work. Essentially, when you feel better you do better, and position yourself for greater success.

In work and in life, a high level of emotional intelligence has myriad benefits: improved physical health, mental well-being and conflict resolution skills, as well as success and leadership. If you find these advantages as appealing as I do, try to incorporate some of the tips mentioned here. Just remember: Much like foreign language fluency (or six-pack abs), EQ is something we need to keep working at in order to maintain. It's worth it, though! ■



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