

The Emotional Side of Leadership

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There is no shortage of research on the study of leadership. Week after week in bookstores across the country, it is easy to find the latest book on leadership, which most often focuses on a corporate perspective. Still, the concepts highlighted in these corporate publications in many cases can be applied to educational leadership. Over the last several years, more is being written both in books and periodicals about the emotional aspects of leadership, at times referred to as the 'soft side' of leadership.

A specific set of technical skills is necessary for individuals to be effective educational leaders. One of the most important criteria for educational leaders to succeed and be effective is to create a shared vision among all stakeholders. In addition, understanding instruction and instructional practices and being a change agent are essential skills of an effective educational leader. Beyond the technical skills of an effective educational leader, an instructional leader must have a highly developed set of interpersonal skills that engage faculty and staff on an emotional level.

School leaders who possess the technical skills and who are able to engage their co-workers at an emotional level are ultimately the most effective leaders (Edwards, 2006). Experts refer to this as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005). Emotional intelligence (EI) can be defined as:

The ability to understand one's emotions and how one's emotions impact others. It also involves one's perception of others: when one understands his emotions, he can manage interpersonal relationships more effectively.

(Edwards, 2010)

The interaction between two or more individuals is a reciprocal relationship, involving a give and take between two or more people. Essential to effective emotional intelligence is an understanding of oneself. Before a leader can truly influence others, s/he must understand how his/her emotions drive his/her decision-making. Successful leaders manage their emotions in a way that instills confidence in others and, in turn, builds trust. In the book *Team of Rivals* by Doris Kearns Goodwin, the author writes about how Abraham Lincoln masterfully managed his own emotions and the emotions of his cabinet, many of whom opposed him throughout the campaign. Lincoln, however, harnessed the strengths of his opponents in a way that benefitted the nation during a

time of tremendous upheaval. The quote below from a review of the book *Team of Rivals* captures the essence of Lincoln's emotional intelligence:

"*Team of Rivals* recounts how Lincoln, a great motivator, got the best out of others...through it all, a strong sense of Lincoln's leadership emerges. Readers see his superhuman empathy, superlative sense of political timing, and patience. But what really set him apart was his ability to strike compromise and control his own emotions..."

(Piore, 2007)

Leaders today can use Lincoln's humble approach to leadership to achieve results. Highlighted in the quote above are several qualities that individuals with a high EI possess: empathy, timing, patience, compromise and control of emotions. In his research, Goleman (2005) has identified five elements of emotional intelligence:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Regulation
- Motivation
- Empathy
- Social Skills

The similarities between the qualities exhibited by Lincoln and those identified by Goleman are clearly evident. The EI skills exhibited by Lincoln a hundred and fifty years ago and the elements of EI identified by Goleman in recent years have withstood the test of time. Regardless of the type of organization or the leadership role, developing one's emotional intelligence enhances the effectiveness of any leader.

In this time of rapid change and high accountability in education, honing and applying emotional intelligence as an educational leader may be more important than ever. Examining each of Goleman's elements of EI in the context of school leadership assists teacher leaders, building level administrators and central office administrators in becoming more effective leaders.

Self-awareness is the ability to understand and manage one's emotions; leaders who possess a high level of self-awareness do not let their emotions rule their decision-making. They are also aware of their strengths and weaknesses. In education the goal should always be to make decisions that are in the best interest of the students. Focusing first and primarily on students—not emotions—ensures that the decision made will best benefit the school and, in turn, the community.

Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses is another important piece of self-awareness. Educational leaders who know what they do well and what they struggle with will be better able to build a leadership team that has complementing skill sets. It has been said, "hire your weaknesses." Find others who have skills in areas where you are weak and allow their skill set to complement those of others on the leadership team.

Leaders have their own perception of their strengths and weaknesses, which may or may not match others' perceptions. Completing a 360-degree leadership assessment provides educational leaders with an objective view of how others perceive the leaders' strengths and weaknesses, and allows leaders to compare their self-assessment to peers, subordinates, and supervisors. One instrument that can be useful is the Educational Leadership Inventory (ELI) ©.

Self-regulation is the ability to manage emotions like anger and jealousy. Individuals who are self-regulating do not make impulsive, careless decisions. A formula that can be helpful in self-regulation is $E + R = O$. *Event* plus *Reactions* equals *Outcomes*. In the course of any school day countless events will occur that can stir up countless emotions. How one reacts to the event(s) will determine the outcome.

Another way to look at this is to consider the outcome you are looking for, then determine the reactions. Too often situations occur that are blown out of proportion because there is an overreaction (an emotional reaction) to the event. For example, a simple classroom management situation in a classroom can escalate because of a teacher's overreaction.

Motivation is another characteristic of an individual with a high EI; in this case the motivation is intrinsic. Great educational leaders make decisions on and are motivated by what will benefit the organization and the students, not personal gain or external reward. These individuals are also usually able to defer gratification for the longer-term gain. They seek out new challenges and opportunities and are very goal-oriented. Too often leaders in education look for the quick fix. But change and results happen over time, and those who set clearly defined goals and are willing to stay the course see the results.

Fullan (2007) talks about the 'implementation dip', where with new initiatives, conditions often get worse before they get better. School leaders who are motivated, accept challenges, set clearly defined goals and have a future orientation are able to survive the implementation dip to achieve long-term gains.

Many leaders often undervalue empathy, which is the ability to understand others' situations, conditions, and feelings. The empathetic leader recognizes the wants and needs of those they lead, and are typically excellent listeners and highly effective at managing relationships.

The educational leader must be adept at managing relationships at multiple levels, including, among others, relationships with teachers, students, parents, and support staff. The empathetic educational leader views any situation through the eyes of that individual. This is not to say that s/he agrees with that person's views on a particular situation or issue, but rather the empathetic leader is sensitive to another's viewpoint. In many cases, individuals are simply looking for someone to listen and understand, not necessarily agree with them.

Social skills are the fifth element identified by Goleman (2005) as an essential EI skill, and refer to one's ability to interact with a wide range of people from different backgrounds in a variety of social settings. Individuals who possess these skills typically foster collaboration and cooperation among groups and teams. In addition, these individuals are not seeking credit for successes, but rather they focus on the successes of others.

An example in educational leadership would be a school leader who interacts with the Board of Education member equally as well as s/he interacts with the support staff. This leader sees the value that all stakeholders bring to the school and recognizes their individual contributions. Educational leaders with highly developed social skills build meaningful relationships with all stakeholders; they build high-functioning teams and distribute leadership throughout the organization.

Highly developed EI can contribute to the effectiveness of all educational leaders. EI can be developed, and the first step is to determine one's level of EI and design a plan from there. Throughout history great leaders have demonstrated the skills highlighted above. Time spent on developing these skills will enhance any leader's effectiveness over time.

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