

Emotional Intelligence at Work

Want to improve your relationships with coworkers? Learn how to build emotional intelligence to improve the work space for everyone.



Why does emotional intelligence in the workplace matter?

We need emotional intelligence (EQ) most where we're least likely to find it: at work. The workplace remains the last bastion of IQ worship because many people still believe that getting personal interferes with productivity.

At work, you don't have the ties of love to motivate you to get along with others as you do at home. You don't have the benefit of a shared history to help you understand what moves those around you. That makes it all the more important that you have a way to tune in to what those you work with need right here, right now. You already have that facility - it's active awareness and the empathy that flows from it. Using those elements of your EQ can help achieve success and solve problems on the job. Office politics, morale problems, and lack of cooperation don't have to ruin your work life if you can read and respond to people's feelings.

The four elements of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is composed of four elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. How well acquainted are you with each of

these resources?

EQ in action at work

Self-awareness: the ability to recognize your emotions and their impact while using gut feelings to guide your decisions.

Can you walk into a room, meet a stranger, attend a meeting and quickly sense that something is not as it seems? Formerly known as “intuition,” this instinctual knowledge is based on emotional intelligence.

Self-management: the ability to control your emotions and behavior and adapt to changing circumstances.

Can you adequately harness your anger, disappointment or fear so your emotions don't interfere with your ability to listen or problem solve? Do you know when you need help, and can you ask for it?

Social awareness: the ability to sense, understand, and react to the emotions of others and to feel comfortable socially

Can you tell when you are unintentionally making another person uncomfortable or when someone who is smiling is really upset?

Relationship management: the ability to inspire, influence, and connect to others and to manage conflict.

Can you remain calm, energized and focused in the face of another's distress or during an upsetting situation? Can you defuse conflict with humor or by listen convincingly to another's point of view?

Remember that we all share the same emotions

Many organizations are crippled by people dedicating more time to protecting themselves from real and imagined threats, than to working. When fear rules, productive hours are lost in attempts to keep the upper hand, dodge the boss' wrath, or compete for position. The undeniable fact that some people have more power than others in any organization does not have to overwhelm you with fear, as long as you remember that we all share the same emotions.

Does your manager act tough because they're afraid being compassionate means

being weak?

Are your employees sullen because they feel just as demoralized as you would if no one showed appreciation for their work?

Does the person in the next office snap at you because they're just as worried about rumored layoffs as you are?

When you remember that we are all peers on an emotional level, it becomes easier to approach the boss, to ask an employee to give a little more, or to understand that a coworker's irritability is nothing personal. Emotions are great levelers among people; use them to tie you together rather than rend you apart.

We all need to feel valued and needed

How long do you think you'd last in a job where you didn't feel valued by those around you? No matter the job, when we interact with people who make us feel valued and cared for, we feel good about ourselves and are inspired to work harder, longer, and more creatively. And when we make others feel valued and cared for, we get the kind of support we need to do our jobs well. Whether you're dealing with an employer, an employee, or a coworker, showing appreciation will go a long way.

Nurture teamwork, cooperation, and empathy

Psychologists have known for years that people working together are more efficient and productive than the same number of individuals working separately. Empathy encourages us all to work cooperatively.



If you're an employee...

Employees can prevent a toxic “every person for themselves” atmosphere from forming by extending empathetic offers to help, staying alert for opportunities to yield when an issue is more important to someone else than to themselves, and simply showing interest in one another’s work and lives. Avoid gossip and cliques. Both create tension and mistrust, lower morale, and reduce productivity.

If you're the boss...

Make it worthwhile for your staff to rely on and assist each other. Offer bonuses or other incentives for group rather than individual achievements. For example, you could hold TGIF lunches and periodic morning bagel fests on you—sometimes *without* you—so your group can feel free to establish the common ground of griping about the boss. Set up a mentor program matching new employees with those with the greatest seniority. Use your incisive emotional powers to offset one person’s weaknesses with another’s strengths, and soon they’ll all be pulling one another up to new heights.

Trust your intuitive feelings

Our feelings come to us before our thoughts, yet we’ve learned to distrust our intuition in the workplace. As many smart investors, marketers, and designers will attest, stock market killings, media blitzes, and new product development often depend on hunches. There isn’t always time for methodical gathering of data. Nor is there always a need. Your hunches, after all, are the product of instantaneously gathered and sorted emotional information that tells you what matters most to you in any situation, what might be wrong based on your previous experiences, and when something is not what it seems to be.

Heeding them is not taking as crazy of a risk as the IQ minions would have you believe. It's often the smartest, most responsible move you can make. You may get a lot of opposition, but stand firm and follow your hunches. Without them you lose the ability to switch gears, grab opportunities, and respond to emergencies.

10 ways to work smarter using emotional intelligence

1. **Use your body to sharpen your mind.** Along with adopting good health habits generally, spending about twenty minutes exercising once or twice a day adds energy, sensitivity, patience, flexibility, and creativity to your portfolio.
2. **Invite feelings, not just thoughts.** Make it safe for people to tell you how they feel, and they'll work harder and better. People tell the truth to those who withhold judgements, keep confidences, and maintain their composure. Make sure that describes your work persona.
3. **Establish emotional boundaries.** Intimacy with a boss, employee, or coworker can flood the workplace with emotional memories that cause thoughtful, reasonable professionals to lose their objectivity and provoke resentment in onlooking coworkers.
4. **Make no decision based on data alone.** Before you turn in that figure-filled report or cite an authority to back up your recommendations, use your intuition. Stop and ask yourself how you feel about the position you're taking- it's a habit that will help you feel more confident and ensure you're acting with integrity.
5. **Be flexible.** Be ready to modify long-term goals based on active awareness of how short-term objectives are going. Stubbornly charging towards goals that no longer serve the organization will get you left behind with yesterday's news.
6. **Be generous.** When a point of conflict means more to the other person than you (information you receive through awareness and empathy), surrender graciously; you'll earn your coworker's gratitude and support.
7. **Begin any negative comment with a positive one.** You're much more likely to get an empathetic ear if you preface criticism with appreciation, and complaints with your intention to cooperate.
8. **Speak out when you feel something is important.** If a problem or a conflict is bothering you at a gut level, waiting too long to speak up will invite emotional flooding. When you take action, you change how you feel about the problem, which has a powerful impact on your well-being—even if you don't get the response or change you're seeking.
9. **Listen with empathy.** Using your emotions will never distract you from the task at hand. Empathy gives you instant understanding of what someone is saying, so don't try to save time by planning what you're going to say while another person is

speaking—that's not heartfelt listening, and others know it.

10. **Take the risk of appearing imperfect.** High performers ask for help when they need it and admit to being wrong when they make a mistake. Then they move on, effective and efficient.

Using emotional intelligence to be a great employee

Even those who manage other people are usually supervised by someone else, so anyone can take the advice that follows. Being a good employee is mainly a matter of doing what you were hired for while retaining your own integrity. And if you're like most of us, it's also a matter of getting ahead. Here are some ways to do that:

When there's a problem, speak up. It would be great if we all had high-EQ bosses, but even the most empathetic boss doesn't have time to figure out or guess your feelings. Strong, physical pangs that won't go away will tell you when you shouldn't stay silent.

Know what you want from the job. If you don't know what you want, you can't ask for it. What's most important to you at this point in your life, and how do you expect this job to fulfill those needs?

Know how well you're performing from day to day. The most demoralizing occupational event is to be fired without any idea it was coming. Layoffs aside, it hardly ever has to be that way. If you're keeping your mental powers sharp and you know your job is enhancing your well-being, you're probably performing well and doing what's right for you. As long as you're staying empathic enough to know that it's also right for your boss and the organization, you should never be taken by surprise.

Know what your boss feels is important. This isn't always what they say is important. Attune to everything that expresses feelings -what the boss does vs. says, where the boss's own fears seem to lie, how the boss treats other people—to get an idea of how to fulfill the boss's needs on the job. With empathy you'll feel an echo of your boss's emotions as long as you're paying attention.

Know the values of the organization and how you feel about them

Every organization has a personality, too. Especially at a new job, keep your eyes, ears, and heart open for information about the organization's M.O. You need to know not just what the organization's production goals are but how it does business. Is it a three-piece-suit atmosphere or a shirtsleeves workplace? Do people chat casually and spontaneously or make appointments with each other? Are plans made openly or secretly? Is the organization's style conservative or daring, people oriented or product oriented? How are people treated when let go? Is hiring done first from within or always from without? Are loyalty and camaraderie in evidence? Do coworkers like each other or merely tolerate each other?

Where do you fit in? Do you like what you discover? If not, what can you live with and what makes you feel physically uncomfortable? Knowing that will help you navigate a successful course for as long as you decide to stay with this organization.

Using emotional intelligence to be a great coworker



Being a good coworker is largely a matter of contributing to the workplace morale and team spirit. It might seem preferable to stick to yourself and just get your job done, but people who try that tack often discover that their own interests as well as those of the organization suffer as a result. Unfortunately, cultivating good relationships with your fellow employees can be a challenge. Not everyone will view you as a comrade, and in turn you won't feel open and trusting around everyone you work with. Your intuition about people is crucial in such cases. Here are a few ways to use it to your advantage:

Don't make assumptions about those you work with. It's so easy to project your prejudices and biases on to your workplace. You may not have to get to know your coworkers as well as your boss or employees, but you'll never learn anything about them if you begin by assuming stereotypes like recent college grads are always arrogant or almost-retirees are stodgy; that women can be manipulated by emotions and men by data. Let your emotions show you what's unique about everyone.

Don't expect anyone to communicate with 100 percent honesty. Some people seem incapable of plain speaking at work. They're afraid, they're too polite, they're cautious, and they rarely say what they mean or mean what they say. You can wait until you've been burned several times to figure it out, or you can pay extra attention to what your body tells you they feel, and less to what they say. Trust your intuition about people. Be particularly alert with people who may view you as a competitor.

Be prepared to draw the line. There's a limit to how close you'll want to be with a coworker, but that doesn't mean you won't or shouldn't form friendships at work. If you share the values and goals of the organization and its other employees, there's a good chance that you'll find friends there. Stay attuned to your own feelings, however, so you know when you want to be an acquaintance, not a close friend. Don't let emotional blackmail or office politics pressure you into relationships you don't want. If you feel uneasy with a relationship, trust your hunch and back off. If a work conflict comes up with someone who is now a close friend, you'll be able to tell from the intensity of your own feelings and your empathic feelings where your priorities lie.

Offer help; don't wait for people to ask. Not only will your generosity contribute to the camaraderie and morale in the office, but your sensitivity to the needs of others will gain you their future support and loyalty.

Don't take it personally. Remember that everyone has an agenda, a personal life, and a unique style of interaction. You don't have to take anyone's behavior personally. Let coworker's behavior bring out your empathy, not your sympathy. You can understand how they might be feeling without being consumed by emotional memory or taking responsibility for their angst.

Using emotional intelligence to be a great boss

Like it or not (and many in supervisory positions do not), if your job involves managing other people, they'll view you as their fearless leader. That means that even if they've been raising their EQs too, they'll look to you to initiate action, elicit communication, and set the style and pace of daily operations. Here's how you can meet their expectations to get them to meet yours:

Anticipate people problems. Use your empathy to know your employees and how they interrelate. With it, you understand what motivates individuals, what relationships have formed, and even the separate "personality" of the organization or department. Will your department's rising stats begin to fall now that a mentor has retired? Will a reorganization remove critical support systems? Will turning a project over to a consultant be a relief or an affront to your staff? The more you know about how your employees feel, the less often your own actions will inadvertently create havoc or resentments.

Be the first to speak. Even if you've created a safe and open atmosphere for communication, some people will always be intimidated by the boss and won't bring up a problem before it's imposed a hefty toll. That's why it's so important to be quick to talk honestly with your staff about potential problems or changes and invite comment. If you sense discontent from one or more employees, try to broach the subject in a way that relieves their insecurities—then respect their privacy if they still decline to talk.

Make it known that you're always ready for employees to improve themselves. We energize our world of work by looking for strengths in others. Working people have hidden talents that can be used for the benefit of all. Nothing builds morale better than noting the value of others. Let your employees know that you're open to their reaching as far as they can, and they'll probably aim higher.

Offer only as much as you intend to give. Don't invite comment if you don't intend to listen wholeheartedly. Never hold out the promise of rewards if you can't deliver. Don't hold brainstorming sessions and tell your staff how brilliant their ideas are if you never intend to put any of them to use. People recognize lip service when they hear it and don't work very hard for those they don't trust.

Model flexibility and adaptability. If you want your employees to be creative self-starters who work up to their potential, show them that proactive problem-solving is

more important than sticking to rigid plans and rules. Can you toss out a game plan that isn't working without worrying about how it makes you look? Can you react quickly to reports of problems by your employees? Can you regroup and re-strategize without acting put out?

Cultivate employees, don't coddle them. Despite what some managers believe, you can listen to your employees and show concern for their feelings without babying them. Remember, empathy is different from sympathy, and you must stay attuned to your own feelings while attempting to understand theirs. With a high EQ, you'll be able to cut off a heart-to-heart talk before it becomes unproductive and interferes with your own goals, without offending your employee. You'll be able to praise people for a job well done without fearing that it will result in a relaxed work effort. You'll be able to balance your employees' need to be valued, with your need to achieve goals. Your emotional acceptance will keep you from being manipulated by someone else's distress.



Other resources

[Raising Your Emotional Intelligence](#) (Book) - Jeanne Segal PhD

[The Language of Emotional Intelligence: The Five Essential Tools for Building Powerful and Effective Relationships](#) (Book) - Jeanne Segal PhD

[Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace](#) (PDF) - How to build and practice EQ to improve your success at work. (University of South Florida)

[Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace](#) - University of Southern California

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