

Good Leaders Use Emotional Intelligence

This guide to using emotional intelligence to become a more effective leader was originally written by HelpGuide’s co-founder, Dr. Jeanne Segal, as an article for the Catholic Health Association of the United States



Emotional intelligence and leadership

“Emotional intelligence” (EQ) is essential for social and spiritual competency in any field, and nowhere is it more important than in health care, where *feelings* affect individual as well as institutional health. The leaders charged with providing high-quality health services to patients also serve the emotional needs of staff members in the hospital, clinic, or office.¹ These two functions are more closely aligned than is commonly recognized. Health care leaders who are emotionally intelligent can improve the health of their institutions on many levels. And in faith-based communities, where spiritual connection and compassion are

emphasized, emotional intelligence reinforces the ability to bridge mind and body with spirit.

Although EQ is now accepted as a core attribute of success, the term refers only to the observation of an end product. Good research lies behind the recognition that people who are self-aware, compassionate, able to read others, and capable of both experiencing and containing strong emotions are more successful than those who lack those qualities, even though the latter may have greater intellectual capacities. Research suggests that at least some people are born with a high degree of personal and interpersonal competency.² That's wonderful for the emotionally endowed. But the important question for the rest of us is, "Can EQ be learned by those who are *not* lucky enough to have come into this world with an abundance of personal and social skill?" My answer is yes, though the methods for teaching and learning this set of skills are sharply debated. I believe that EQ can be learned — but not in the way we are normally used to learning.

EQ is physiological as well as psychological in nature. Its source lies in the core feelings and sensations that originate in the oldest part of our brains, the brain stem.³ These core feelings, sensations, and emotions, which may begin even before birth and are developed by the second month of life, are the source of our individuality and our personal and collective instinct for survival.⁴ The self-awareness, self-control, insight, and empathy toward others that define EQ are rooted in these core instincts. [Trauma](#) can create a barrier to self-awareness and our survival instincts,⁵ but healing through reconnection to these core instincts and the EQ they provide is always possible.

How to become an emotionally intelligent leader

Because EQ is an instinctual resource that can be blocked but not eliminated, emotionally intelligent leadership is a skill that [can be learned and taught throughout life](#). When we are courageous enough to learn from the pain of the mistakes we have made in dealing with others, we become emotionally intelligent leaders through trial and error. Our errors in judgment become our teachers, and we grow in our ability to manage others and ourselves. But a sometimes quicker way to learn EQ leadership is through the day-to-day example of an emotionally intelligent mentor — someone with the willingness to be generous with himself or herself and candid about his or her experiences. Educators agree that there is no more effective way to learn, or to teach, than through the example of someone we trust with our feelings and look up to.⁶

The following are suggestions based on some of the characteristics and competencies that

make a person emotionally developed and a good leader. These particular suggestions have been tailored for senior leaders in a faith-based ministry.

Tune in to your core instincts

Take reflective time every day to tune in to your core instincts. We learn to do this by slowing down enough to comprehend messages that our bodies are constantly sending us via our physical and emotional feelings. The sensual physical language of the body is nonverbal. Deciphering it takes time and effort. The slowing down needed to attune to our feelings and sensations can be accomplished through prayer or meditation, *when the focus of such practice is internal discovery*. This is particularly important if you lead a pressured life. Pressured lifestyles can activate endorphins in the brain that induce in a person a drugged-like state of false well-being while actually reducing that person's awareness of feelings and needs and even blunting his or her instincts for survival.⁷

The instinctual knowing that constantly keeps us informed of our most pressing problems and deeper values also informs the critical ability to know when we *don't* know — when we don't have enough information, or the right information, to make a good decision. Because emotionally intelligent leaders draw, in their decision making, from both thought-based intellectual resources and intuitive sensory-based resources, they have a greater amount of data from which to draw. This makes their communication more effective and their decisions sounder.

Connect thought and feeling

Make an effort to inform your thoughts with your feelings and your feelings with your thoughts. Unfortunately, the nonverbal language of the body can be, and often is, shouted down by the mind. Then you can't hear yourself at an instinctual level. At other times, such as when some kind of unresolved trauma remains an issue in your life, the body and emotions can have more sway over your life than conscious thoughts do, a condition that can result in [panic attacks](#); outbursts of anger; and physical symptoms such as migraines, stomach disorders, or backaches. People who make an effort to maintain a connection between what they are thinking, saying, and doing, on one hand, and what they are feeling, on the other, bring the wisdom of their core instincts to their decisions and actions.

Listen to feelings

Listen to feelings as well as to words, so that the people you serve and work with will feel understood. The capacity to listen in a way that makes others feel understood is also tied to this ability to integrate information and instinct. Recently, at a hospital, I experienced firsthand the difference between being listened to and feeling that I was really being *heard*. My 90-year-old father lay dying following brain surgery. The medication he was taking had caused blood vessels in his brain to rupture. It could no longer be used, for obvious reasons, and yet it was needed to keep his heart pumping regularly.

I had his power of attorney, clearly stating that he did not want heroic means used to merely keep him alive, but that was what was being done. All the half-dozen attending physicians were excellent practitioners and, I sincerely believe, deeply caring people. Every one of them listened to me as I repeated my father's wishes but only one *heard* that my father and his family wanted the tubes that were keeping him alive removed. It took an agonizing two days to finally be heard — not that I don't understand the pain felt by people who have dedicated themselves to life on those occasions when they are forced to submit to death.

When leaders add to their training an awareness of their own instinctual feelings and a sensitivity to the experience of others, they come more quickly to wiser, more fully informed decisions.

Practice nonverbal communication

Good communication, especially that done with sick or frightened people, is [almost entirely nonverbal](#). Notice how a really good physician or nurse will make eye contact, smile, comfort the patient, listen to his or her concerns, and physically touch him or her in a gentle way. Then look at the opposite, the health care professional who is cold, businesslike, or unaware of what the patient or staff member he or she happens to be dealing with is feeling.

Experts recognize that emotional contact, most of which is nonverbal, has the power to mitigate both physical and emotional trauma, whereas a lack of emotional contact can make it worse.⁸ Emotionally intelligent leaders who are in tune with their own and others' nonverbal communications can both transmit and receive information that goes well beyond words into the realm of healing.

Develop your capacity for empathy

Work on developing your [capacity for empathy](#). Empathy is the ability to gauge a situation through another person's eyes, and heart, *whether you agree with that person or not*. Empathy is the ability to be so secure in your awareness of your own thoughts, feelings, and values that you can also perceive opposing points of view without losing sight of your needs. If you lack empathy, you cut yourself off at the knees in many kinds of negotiations, particularly those that involve conflict. It's a matter of connection versus isolation: Connection to others through genuine openness to their perspective gives you insight and understanding that is impossible to attain without empathy. In addition, when you can successfully empathize with how other people perceive and feel, you are also much better at understanding what they need and meeting those needs. People generally feel more loyalty to, and are willing to work harder for, those who make an effort to "tune in to them." When interest is shown in what people feel, need, and care about, as well as what they do, a deeper level of satisfaction results.

Your employees sense the difference between real and superficial interest in their well-being.

Contain your emotions

Learn to contain your emotions. Emotional containment is another skill that can be learned once you become willing to rationally explore your internal landscape. Emotionally intelligent leaders have the ability to contain their emotions. Containing emotions is not suppressing or ignoring them but being in charge of when and how you express them. Leaders, no less than others, experience the most difficult of feelings, including anger or grief. At one time or another, all leaders feel like shouting or crying, but emotional awareness helps them maintain appropriate behavior. By keeping their emotions current and keeping old feelings separate from new ones, they can often avoid overreaction — the pitfall of taking problems or conflicts too "personally." Indeed, it is precisely because such leaders are not afraid to [experience their emotions](#) that they avoid losing control of themselves, on one hand, or stressing their bodies by avoiding their feelings, on the other.

Treat challenges as unique

Respond uniquely to every challenge that confronts you. EQ is the polar opposite of a knee-jerk approach to life. Circumstances change and can bring about significant changes in individuals. Emotionally intelligent decisions are based for the most part not on rules, but on

judgment that is a mix of head/intellect (What is the task? How important is it? What is needed now?) and heart/instinct (What does my intuition tell me about the effect of this decision? What do I feel about the long-term consequences for all concerned? What do I sense may be missing in the way I am thinking about the problem?).

Emotionally intelligent leaders focus their attention in present time, responding to whatever is going on *as it is going on*. They don't clutter up their attention with assumptions or "could have/should have" thought processes. Every situation is different and deserves a unique response. Doing so builds flexibility, adaptability, and, indeed, unflappability. Of course, uniform principles of management and good practice do exist: We can't use double standards in the way we treat employees. But each person's situation really does require a unique and personal response. People know the difference between a caring leader and one who merely applies the rules "by the book." A real leader is not a perfectionist, but someone who recognizes that it is possible to expand one's education in human nature every day. The leader who claims to be authoritative and refuses to budge or negotiate is not likely to wear well with others over the long term.

Embrace interdependence

Emotionally intelligent leaders are fully aware of how important other people are to their personal and professional well-being and are not afraid to acknowledge this debt. Emotionally intelligent leadership is not lone leadership. Interdependence should not be confused with enmeshment or emotional dependency. It is, rather, a genuine appreciation of what other people have to offer and do. A strong motivator for loyalty and consciousness is the feeling of being seen and appreciated. And when the people who work for us *work well*, our job is easier.

Today one of the biggest problems in institutional health care settings is the fact that there is more work to do than qualified people to do it. Many staff people, and nurses in particular, feel overburdened and overwhelmed. Emotionally intelligent leaders understand that recognition and sincere appreciation mitigate stressful situations. This is especially true in health services because they tend to attract people who genuinely want to be of service to others. Human connection counterbalances stress and inspires the best in people. Connect to your staff in a way that lets them know you understand and recognize what they actually do. Pick up the phone and make the time to listen. You can be interdependent with no loss of authority or respect and unburden yourself of stress at the same time.

Trust your body's wisdom

Empower your spiritual work with your body's wisdom and intuitive understanding. Faith and spirit are accessed through the body of an emotionally intelligent leader. EQ is the result when you find the spiritual connection between your body, your beliefs, and the work you are devoted to doing. Spirituality is not a dogma; it's an experience. Our "talk" (our intentions, beliefs, and creeds) and "walk" (our actions and behaviors) should be consistent. When they are not, when the leader's mission is inconsistent with what is practiced, those who look to leaders become confused. This lower level of consciousness results in a low level of spirituality.

EQ results in healthier lives

All skills discussed above [can be learned](#). Once learned, they will lead to a healthy state of focused, unflappable competency that allows leaders to sustain leadership positions for long periods of time.

EQ is a blend of instinct and intellect. We are born with feelings and instincts that develop alongside intelligence. Unresolved traumas limit our ability to be in touch with our instincts and limit our ability to think rationally. Cultural conditioning that places mind and body in opposition to one another also disrupts EQ. But because EQ is the product of learning and instinctual resources that are never truly lost to us, it can always be enhanced. EQ is not, however, an intellectual quality that we can acquire from books or testing protocols. Those of us who teach it teach *how*, not *what*. Those of us who learn it find ourselves slowing down, breathing more deeply, focusing on our bodies, identifying core instincts, and curing our traumas through brave and open avenues to other hearts. In this way, we use EQ to create healthier, more satisfying and meaningful lives for others and ourselves.

Notes

1. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam, New York City, 1995, pp. 165, 184.
2. Howard Gardner, "Rethinking the Value of Intelligence Tests," *New York Times Educational Supplement*, November 3, 1986; Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence*, Basic Books, New York City, 1983, p. 9; see also Howard Gardner and Mara Krechevsky, "The Emergence and Nurturance of Multiple Intelligences in Early Childhood: The Project Spectrum Approach," in Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*, Basic Books, New York City, 1993.

3. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, Harcourt, New York City, 1999, pp. 234-276.
4. Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, Basic Books, New York City, 1998, pp. 69-72.
5. Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences*, North American Books, New York City, 1997, p. 91.
6. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Child Development*, National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 2000, pp. 3-14.
7. Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: A Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping*, W. H. Freeman, New York City, 1994, p. 170.
8. Bessel A. van der Kolk, et al., eds., *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*, Guilford Publications, New York City, 1996, pp. 331-378.

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