

# Emotional Intelligence in New Contexts

A stylized, abstract graphic of a human face in profile, facing right. The face is composed of various geometric shapes and colors: purple for the forehead and eye area, orange for the cheek and nose, yellow for the hair and jawline, and red for the lips and chin. The eyes are closed, and the overall style is modern and artistic.

“

**There is no separation of mind and emotions; emotions, thinking, and learning are all linked.**”

*Eric Jensen*

Although the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) first appeared in the 1960s, it gained widespread recognition and popularity in the workplace in the 1990s, following the release of Daniel Goleman’s book on the subject.

And with good reason. The subsequent research supporting the theory suggests better outcomes at work for those who display higher levels of EI.

EI is also known to increase our ability to make sound decisions, build and sustain collaborative relationships, deal effectively with stress, and cope to a greater degree with constant change.

In a work context, this usually means higher performance.

Yet as loudly as EI has been (and is still) championed as a must-have skill for leaders, it’s been just as volubly criticised for its muddy and varied definitions and conceptual inadequacies. Some go so far as to say that EI is a fancy way to dress up the practice of conformity for the purpose of maintaining socially and politically blind cultures.

Certainly, today’s world is significantly different from Goleman’s 90s, and while the practice of emotional intelligence is just as important, the context for exercising this skill may have irrevocably changed.

## What Is Emotional

## Intelligence?

Generally, we define EI as understanding and recognising our own and other people's emotions, with the intent of using them as a guide for how we will behave, interact, and attempt to influence.

Early on in this research, Daniel Goleman identified the key components of EI competence as:

### Individual Competencies

- Self-awareness – emotional self-awareness, mindfulness, resilience
- Self-management – adaptability, emotional balance, achievement orientation, positive outlook

### Relationship Competencies

- Social awareness – empathy, organisational awareness
- Relationship management – influencing, coaching, and mentoring, teamwork, conflict management

These elements have served to provide a guideline and a measure of an individual's emotional status quo and growth.

## Unpacking Emotional

## Intelligence

Over the years, neuroscience has steadily edged towards being able to quantify emotional intelligence, so the results can be used to map and facilitate individual learning.

Though more than 30 psychometric testing tools currently exist, they all overlap in a generalised way by examining Trait EI and Ability EI.

- Trait EI assesses behavioural tendencies and/or emotional self-efficacy
- Ability EI measures a person's theoretical understanding of emotion

These qualities are measured using self-reporting and through problem-solving emotion-related problems. In the workplace, researchers generally recommend it is best to capture Trait EI results. However, feedback from mixed measures (using both) are "likely to equip workers with the positive growth mindset regarding their EI" i.e., they know they can learn about and improve their competency.

Critics of EI testing, however, argue that measurement is based on the idea that there is some kind of universal "right way to feel" and they question how this impacts our moral agency. If emotions are interpreted and judged relative to a certain ideology, then that needs to be reflected in any reporting.



## How do we apply it for Leaders?

As leaders in contemporary contexts, EI has become more important than ever. We no longer work from command-and-control models to achieve results but are responding to the changing needs in our workplaces by adopting a more relational and collaborative approach in order to build a shared vision to achieve our purpose.

This requires leaders to be able to self-regulate emotions, motivate ourselves and others, and collaborate. And the building block for these attributes is self-awareness.

Leaders with high levels of self-awareness:

- know how their own emotions affect their performance
- understand what they need to work to their potential (strengths and limitations)
- understand how their actions impact others

Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to connect with both the heads and hearts of their team members.



## Emotional intelligence 2.0

Recently, tougher critics of EI have described it as a **“regimen of restraint”** whose goal it is to bind people to school, work, family. Indeed, EI is an idea and a practice that smooths social interactions by asking people to better understand themselves and one another and consider how their actions might affect others.

Some of the current thinking behind this perspective calls out the uneven power relationships that exist in our personal and work lives, and the potential for EI (and Social Intelligence) to unwittingly act as a mask, ignoring the fact that much needed change sometimes comes about through uncomfortable debate.

Currently, when we exercise our EI, there is an expectation that we will regulate our emotions and therefore view oppositional behaviours as inappropriate. In an era of significant global social change, EI though important, does not have all the answers, and sometimes it sits in tension with other self-aware, empowering practices such as *being our authentic self, speaking truth to power and standing against injustice*. **Some research** also suggests that the EI makes us risk averse, more prone to stress, and better equipped to manipulate others.

## Key Takeaways

EI of the future is about continuing to acknowledge and learn the skills of emotion management, while balancing that against risk taking and staying true to our own ideology and personal context and how we want that to influence and interact with others.

With this broader understanding of EI as a tool, rather than an inherently positive attribute, EI 3.0 finds us better again, and in a position to sit more consciously and fluidly between reading, understanding, and serving others and reading, understanding, and serving ourselves.



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