

EMOTIONAL LITERACY FOR LEADERS



FACTSHEET

Exploring emotional literacy and its importance for leaders



Emotional literacy improves relationships, creates loving possibilities between people, makes co-operative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community.



Claude Steiner

Emotional Literacy: Intelligence with a Heart, 2003

There is much written on the need for emotional intelligence (EI) in leaders. In recent years the term has become widely used in business and is increasingly recognised as being an important part of leadership. However, there is also some debate over the extent to which someone's EI can be measured scientifically – something that EI models and psychometrics often attempt to do.

Can the awareness of one's emotions be classed as an intelligence? And does measuring someone's emotional intelligence pigeon-hole them, potentially having an adverse effect on awareness? Perhaps it is better to simply explore emotions without the potential judgement that comes from measurement. By increasing a leader's awareness of what emotions exist they are more likely to notice them when they happen to them. They can then use this information to do something about the impact their emotions might have on others.

What is emotional literacy?

Emotional literacy is regarded as a social construction. It is opposed to the more individualistic emotional intelligence which attempts to measure awareness if emotions were measurable in a relatively rational way. Emotional literacy is about increasing awareness of one's own emotions and those of others and using this knowledge to improve relationships through empathy with others and through managing one's emotions.

The first step for leaders to be able to do this is to improve their understanding of what emotions exist and to learn how to express them, or describe them. By building a vocabulary for emotions and feelings and by recognising all the different emotions and feeling that exist, leaders become more aware of the different emotions that they experience, are more able to decipher the nuances in their feelings and therefore become better at expressing what they are feeling to others. This helps to improve communication between people, resulting in more effective relationships. Steve Hein (1996) describes emotional literacy as "the ability to express feelings with specific feeling words, in 3 word sentences." For example, "I feel rejected."

What are the benefits of leaders becoming more emotionally literate?

- **Fewer conflicts.** If leaders are able to identify the emotions that they are feeling and if they are able to articulate that to others, then they are far less likely to come into conflict. In difficult situations there is a certain amount of psychological power in being able to name what is happening internally. The mind naturally needs to know what is happening, especially when there is danger. Once the danger is identified, it can be addressed and resolved. Equally, if a leader has a better understanding of emotions in general they are more able to empathise with the other person and understand what is happening internally for them, meaning conversations are approached with more compassion and less confrontation.



Emotional literacy makes it possible for every conversation, every human contact, and every partnership – however brief or long-term – to yield the largest possible rewards for all involved.



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- **More openness and honesty throughout the organisation.** Exploring emotions without judgement will enable leaders to see that emotions are normal, human and necessary – not something to be feared or ashamed of. This leads to more open, honest communication with their teams and allows for their teams to be more open and honest with them.
- **Enhanced productivity.** If people are able to say that they are angry about something without feeling like they will get into trouble or experience conflict, but that they will be heard and understood, they will feel more secure and supported. And people who feel secure spend less time worrying about their job and more time doing it.
- **Look inwards.** Improving emotional literacy is not possible without exploring what is going on internally. This involves exploring leaders' values, biases, beliefs and their personality.
- **Practice and reflect.** In order for knowledge to become action leaders must have time to practice and reflect on their learning. A programme with the right development framework will balance different learning styles and blend experiential learning and reflective practice in order to catalyse learning.
- **Create the right psychological environment.** Exploring emotions and behaviours is not something that many people find easy. Fear of being judged or of finding something they don't like can send people into 'threat brain' which means that the learning suffers. For self-reflective topics such as this it is vital that the programme creates a safe psychological space – free from judgement and criticism. This helps to ensure that leaders are willing to be open, curious and vulnerable.

How do you achieve this?

If you are commissioning or delivering training to improve leaders' emotional literacy, the programme needs to enable leaders to do the following:

- **Understand the neuroscience of emotion.** In order for leaders to understand their emotions, they first need to understand how and why they occur. This starts with exploring the physiology of emotion – understanding what is happening in the body to create an emotion. Understanding this is the key to controlling it.
- **Explore the different emotions that exist.** There are 3-4000 words in the English language that describe feelings and emotions. But ask most people to tell you the emotions they have felt recently and they will be unlikely to name more than 12. Increasing a leader's emotional vocabulary means that they become more able to decipher the nuances in their feelings and become better at explaining how they are feeling to others.
- **Create the right physical environment.** The physical environment is just as vital to learning as the psychological one. The environment must allow leaders to disconnect from distraction and be fully immersed in the developmental experience. The suspension of action that comes from being away from the office and in an inspiring environment, creates an opportunity to reflect and inquire more deeply.