



Emotional Intelligence and Women's Initiatives: There's Gotta Be a Pony

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What accounts for the derailed careers of seemingly brilliant lawyers from top schools and the meteoric rise of others who barely graduated from a second tier law school? The developers of intelligence instruments have long recognized that there is a social component of cognitive intelligence, one that is not captured in IQ tests. As laypeople, we recognize it, too. We call it street smarts, common sense, maturity, a way with people, and a whole host of other terms that don't quite hit the mark. Without a doubt, some people have personal characteristics that help them overcome, even seemingly clear with ease, obstacles in the most challenging environments. They are the folks who see the glass as half full and will grab a shovel and start digging through a whole pile of manure because "there's gotta be a pony in there somewhere."

In addition to optimism, they exhibit other traits as well, traits that help them understand themselves, express their needs in a constructive way, manage difficult relationships, and cope with the stresses of daily life. Researchers have studied these traits, grouped them into categories, and coined the whole "emotional intelligence" (or EQ, the emotional intelligence quotient).

Why Work on EQ?

There are many definitions of emotional intelligence. Dr. Richard Thompson provides one of the most salient:

Emotional intelligence is "a person's innate ability to perceive and manage his/her own emotions in a manner that results in successful interactions with the environment and, if others are present, to also perceive and manage their emotions in a manner that results in successful interpersonal interactions."

Not surprisingly, emotional intelligence is generally overlooked as a critical leadership skill. Further, as described above, much of EQ is innate. So, why bother? Although EQ is innate, it is not nearly as fixed as IQ, which, for most people, peaks in the late teens and early twenties.¹ EQ, also, tops out, but much later, in our early 40s, coinciding with the peak career years. But, even then, we are not using our emotional intelligence at full potential. We are neither maximizing our best traits, nor have we learned containment strategies for our weaknesses.

What are the dangers of a low EQ? We see it all around us, e.g. unhappiness, back and neck strain, insomnia, road rage. But, we also see it in significant ways – career derailment, strained relationships, lost clients, unethical behavior, high divorce rate, addictions, unhappiness, depression, even suicide. Our emotions and the emotions of those around us affect the efficiency and effectiveness of our practices, loyalty and satisfaction rates, decision-making skills, even firm management's policies and direction.

The primary focus of emotional intelligence training is the development of immediate and relevant skills that can help lawyers succeed when technical skills simply are not enough. High functioning EQ allows lawyers to pull from within the behaviors that facilitate superior work, bring out the best in others, and collaborate effectively in groups. High EQ lawyers understand how to adjust for the culture and values that define a particular firm, yet they do not lose themselves along the way.

¹ But not to worry, Baby Boomers. What we lack in the sharp acuity of youth, brain researchers say we make up for in processing speed.



Lawyers Are Different

Emotional intelligence is one of the most important skills a lawyer can have. Consider the most commonly held traits of the lawyer personality. Research shows that lawyers, relative to non-lawyer professionals, tend to have more than their share of pessimism, skepticism, urgency, and autonomy. On the other hand, they are relatively low on resilience, sociability and collaboration.² But what does this mean?

Well, for one, it means that lawyers may be pre-wired with (or have acquired) traits that serve them well when executing the technical aspects of lawyering. Conversely, however, these traits may also mean that some lawyers may be more challenged with the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that underscore a satisfying career experience in their respective law firm environment.

Although there are some slight gender differences on the components of emotional intelligence, men do not have an advantage over women.³ Also, there are no emotional advantages or disadvantages whatsoever based on race. However, we cannot discard the implications of emotional intelligence on sustained success in the field of law.

Interestingly, there has been some research done on emotional intelligence and female lawyers. In a 2004 report, the Canadian consulting firm, Lexpert, reported findings that indicate that 200 of Canada's most successful lawyers score significantly higher on emotional intelligence than the general lawyer population. High performing lawyers (of both sexes) score particularly well in self-actualization, i.e. the ability to realize one's potential (which is associated with trying to do one's best). The study found that top women are motivated by extreme challenge, the need to overcome adversity, and passion in what they do. Not surprisingly, low EQ female lawyers are characterized by extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation, e.g. fear of failure, recognition, etc. What is clear from the limited research to date is that EQ does have implications for leadership development programs.⁴

Too Touchy-Feely?

According to Aristotle, "The law is reason unaffected by desire." By some interpretations, Aristotle spoke of a necessary separation between reason, on the one hand, and emotion, on the other. Could it be, then, that emotion is the complete opposite of the dispassion that lawyers should demonstrate? Well, let us not trip over the word "emotion." In the psychological sense (and in the definition of emotional intelligence), emotion does not describe "feelings;" rather, it is a way of reasoning. Emotional intelligence for lawyers is less about getting in touch with the "soft side" and more about building awareness of the motivation, within yourself and others, that drives superior performance.

We all have emotional intelligence whether or not it's been assessed and whether or not we choose to use the information. As mentioned, women do not have an advantage over men when it comes to EQ. However, women can use the information about their own emotional intelligence to more effectively deal in the male-dominated culture of a law firm and improve the overall quality of their professional and personal lives. Super star, that is high EQ, lawyers, not only

² Source: Dr. Larry Richards

³ Between genders, the overall scores are similar. On component scores, however, women score higher on social responsibility and empathy, while men score higher on stress tolerance. In North America, women score higher on interpersonal relationships and women score higher in self-regard.

⁴ Because each firm has a unique culture, an emotional intelligence study conducted on any one firm might yield very different results. These results could have tremendous implications for women's initiatives and diversity and inclusion programs.



make more money for themselves and for the firm, they are empowered, successful – however they define success – and self-actualized.

The Role of EQ in Women’s Initiatives

Traditional women’s initiatives have made great strides. In addition to establishing policies that help retain, support and educate female lawyers, women’s initiatives also provide access to business development opportunities, helping to promote women both inside and outside the firm. They have even tackled the pricklier issues of incentives and compensation. These are all necessary and important activities. But many law firm leaders admit that progress is slow.

The most successful women’s initiatives not only improve conditions for women, they lead to practices that benefit the entire firm. Arguably, the absence of women in senior law firm leadership roles has much to do with the work structure, the business model and the male-centric culture, none of which are easy to change. Both men and women admit that the law firm environment can be difficult. Compounding the typical stresses of the lawyer role, are the behaviors that support the dominant group and may, unwittingly provide barriers to the minority. Under stress, individuals will be at their worst, i.e. least capable of realizing their potential. This is where emotional intelligence skills training has the greatest impact on professional development.

How to Use and Build EQ

As mentioned, everyone has emotional intelligence whether or not they choose to do something with the information. There are several good books written on the subject, including those by Daniel Goleman who first introduced the concept to the mainstream in 1995. Just being aware of the components of emotional intelligence can have an impact. However, the best way to improve your emotional intelligence is to take an individual self-assessment or multi-rater (360) assessment. EQ assessments should be administered by a certified professional in a safe and confidential environment. It is the responsibility of the administrator to help interpret the instrument. A face value interpretation of the scores can be misguided and harmful. High is not necessarily good, and low is not necessarily bad. An individual (rather than group) feedback session is highly recommended even if it is not mandated by the EQ program in which you participate; it can help you understand the relationships between the various component of EQ and how to use the information to make positive changes.

Once you have attended an EQ session or have completed your self-study, you will be well equipped to incorporate the feedback into your long-term development plan. The development plan should focus on creating a balance, both by leveraging your strengths and putting containment strategies around your weaknesses. In fact, assessments such as the BarOn EQ-360® provide robust feedback reports, one of which is the EQ-i Business Report, containing SMART goal setting and action planning worksheets in addition to nearly 30 pages of feedback on each of the 15 subscales of emotional intelligence.

Further, EQ leadership reports can be used to help identify and groom the best leaders on a firm-wide basis. These reports help firms in placement, training, and identifying universal development needs and potential areas of concern.

Women’s initiatives often stress the importance of allowing people to bring their “whole selves” to the job. Emotional intelligence is a critical tool that can help women do this in a manner that increases their level of success, but will ultimately help them model behaviors that improve the fabric of the firm.

There *is* a pony in there.