

# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP\*

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## Abstract

Emotional intelligence is the cornerstone of every decision a principal makes; solving problems and making judgments are part of a leader's system of values and beliefs. Mayer and Salovey (1997) described emotionally intelligent leaders as those who are able to perceive and understand emotions and to regulate emotions to foster emotional and intellectual growth. Despite misconceptions about the influence of emotional intelligence on organizational efficacy, school leaders are incapable of divesting their personal feelings from professional decisions. George (2008) suggested that there are four dimensions of emotional intelligence: expressing emotions, using them to improve decision making, knowledge about emotions, and managing emotions. A principal's emotional intelligence skills are vital to collaborative efforts to increase student achievement and to ensure the well-being of a school as a learning community.

School leadership is one of the most researched topics in all of the organizational sciences. Researchers have examined what leaders are like, what they do, and how they behave in situational contexts. The resulting theories about leadership have increased our understanding of its challenges, but how and why leaders exert a positive influence on their organizations continue to be unanswered questions. The majority of leadership research is focused on the cognitive abilities of leaders and gives almost no credence to the emotions and feelings they bring to work each day. Feelings have been characterized as obstacles to rational thought and behavior. Since the early 1990s, however, Daniel Goleman and others (George and Bettenhausen, 1990) have published research results to suggest that leaders' feelings play an important role in what they do and the decisions they make.

A principal's leadership skills in curriculum and instruction link teacher efficacy to student achievement. While management tasks such as making class schedules, monitoring attendance, and conducting personnel evaluations continue to occupy much of a school leader's workday, performance measures in The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 have changed the nature of school leadership and student learning. Curriculum, instruction, and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) have become priorities in our nation's schools.

NCLB's requirements for all students to make AYP in all subjects tested means that principals and teachers are expected to plan for student success by making decisions based on empirical data. Differences of opinion about methods for improving student learning are inevitable, but an instructional leader with emotional intelligence is equipped to lead a faculty to consensus without upsetting its members. Emotional intelligence means having the ability to manage one's own emotions while being sensitive to the needs of other people. Emotional intelligence includes not only our emotions, but the moods and feelings we display during personal interactions. Mayer and Salovey (1997) define emotional intelligence as "the ability to perceive

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emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p. 5).

Emotional intelligence is the cornerstone of every decision a principal makes; solving problems and making judgments are part of a leader’s system of values and beliefs. Current research on leadership traits emphasizes the importance of cognitive abilities over emotions and implies that feelings are obstacles to rational behavior and logical decision making. Nelson and Low (2003), however, tell us that emotional intelligence “give us a more constructive view that problems exist for a purpose and that they present an opportunity to actively participate in life” (p. 75).

Studies on emotional intelligence suggest that our moods and feelings are connected to our thought processes and behavior. Moods are generalized emotional states that are not usually linked to specific events or circumstances. Feelings, however, are more intense than moods, demand our immediate attention, and are likely to interrupt our thinking; they influence our judgment, memory, creativity, and reasoning.

Empirical research on emotional intelligence is in its infancy, but several misconceptions about its application are commonplace.

First, emotional intelligence does not mean that someone is pleasant all of the time. There are occasions when leaders have to be confrontational; emotional intelligence involves a heightened sensitivity to the needs of other people and is an innate skill upon which leaders can rely to deliver a difficult message effectively.

Second, emotional intelligence does not mean a carefree expression of one’s feelings. Instead, emotionally intelligent leaders learn to manage feelings and express them appropriately.

Third, emotional intelligence develops slowly during childhood; we learn more about it and gain the skills we need as we age. Unlike cognitive intelligence, our emotional skills are not determined by genetics. They are refined through repeated use.

Despite misconceptions, school leaders have always used emotional intelligence to make and enforce decisions affecting their organizations. A leader’s awareness of feelings and their intensity is integral to both functions. George (2000) found that “feelings have been shown to influence the judgments that people make; when people are in positive moods, for example, their perceptions and evaluations are likely to be more favorable” (p. 1029).

George and others (Damasio, 1994; Goleman, 1995) suggest that many organizations continue to believe in the myth of the rational decision maker, or someone who can set aside personal feelings when making professional decisions. Leaders, however, are human beings with a full range of feelings and emotions. Careful practice, empathy, and concern for others enable them to use emotional intelligence to manage their own and others’ emotions and to express their feelings in helpful ways. Difficult decisions that affect an organization become more agreeable through a leader’s empathy for the feelings of its members. George reminds us that there are at least four major aspects of emotional intelligence: expressing emotions, using emotions to improve decision making, knowledge about emotions, and managing emotions. Emotionally intelligent leaders manage their organization’s culture to reinforce important norms and values and to inspire teachers and students to achieve excellence. Emotional intelligence guides their planning for organizational success, assists in motivating teachers by recognizing and rewarding work activities, generates enthusiasm and excitement among the staff, and helps to build a distinctive identity for their school. Further, it stimulates creative thought, reduces stress, and leads to improved organizational morale. Nelson and Low described the influence of emotional intelligence on leadership when they wrote, “effective leadership is people centered and effective leaders know, understand, and respect the needs, values, and goals of others” (p. 161).

The principal’s role in instructional leadership means working cooperatively with other people to improve student achievement. A leader’s capacity for social awareness, empathic behavior, decision making, and the ability to exert a positive influence over others are pivotal skills in attaining those goals.

George noted that emotionally intelligent leaders use an intuitive sense to understand their followers’ emotions and to instill in them an appreciation for the importance of their work. This skill is most useful when an organization face challenges or opportunities that require mutual trust among its members. Its

relevance to school leadership is important because principals make decisions that affect the well-being of everyone in their learning communities.

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