

EI a key element to leadership and success

Why are some people more successful than others in work, life or both? According to Dr Dorrian Aiken, their emotional intelligence (EI) is probably very high. Dr Aiken is a part-time lecturer on MPhil in coaching programme at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB).



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“EI plays a critical role in determining your happiness and success and determines how we manage, apply and regulate our emotions and our impact on others. It has been proven scientifically that, on their own, a traditional IQ and personality test cannot solely assess executive competency, as intrinsic emotional engagement and motivation are key indicators of high performance.”

Dr Aiken says that people have both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. “The former is the ability to relate to others through seeing their perspective, with a sense of empathy, and understanding of their moods, temperaments, motivations and intentions. Intrapersonal intelligence, on the other hand, refers to your ability to accurately understand personal feelings: this relates to self-awareness, self-reflection, and spiritual awareness.”

EI important element in leadership

To many researchers in human behaviour, EI is seen as essential to a successful life as it greatly assists you in any interpersonal situation. Dr Aiken says having a high level of EI equips leaders to be more efficient.

“Emotions are contagious and this is a critical realisation for leadership, let alone parenting or managing relationships like marriage. A leader’s mood and behaviour have a significant impact on everyone else. A cranky and ruthless boss (or life partner, for that matter) can create a toxic environment likely to result in negative underachievers who ignore opportunities. An inspirational and inclusive leader is supportive, inspiring and encourages those they lead to view any challenge as surmountable.”

A blend of nature and nurture

Are we born with a capacity for EI, and can it be taught? Dr Aiken says for years there has been much debate around the subject. “Are people born with certain levels of empathy, for example, or do they acquire empathy as a result of life’s experiences? The answer is both. The bottom line is that emotional intelligence can be learned, and our predisposition for

emotional intelligence competencies is a blend of nature and nurture.

“Babies are reckoned to be born with a predisposition for empathy, with a desire to love and to be loved. The Guardian (in Britain) recently reported that research with very young babies suggests that the roots of compassion, empathy and moral reasoning might be in place from birth. The environment that greets them at birth is a strong determining factor in whether empathy blossoms or withers within them.”

To enhance emotional intelligence, Dr Aiken suggests experiential learning, and many iterations of practice in self-observation until people are aware of themselves in the moment: the kind of awareness where you recognise: “Ah! That’s what triggers me when I behave like that. Now I know the trigger, I can consciously choose to change my behaviour instead of lapsing into a knee-jerk reaction.” Also, once you recognise the trigger and the emotion in yourself, you become more skilful in identifying it in others and are able to address a situation with much more emotional sensitivity and thought.

Embedding emotionally intelligent behaviour

She says you would need a coach or a trusted friend from whom you are willing to receive feedback, with whom you are willing to explore your blind spots, and then take on self-observation practices on a daily basis in order to grow self-awareness initially. This should be followed by increasing your emotional self-control, in other words, the ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check and bring flexibility and resilience in managing change.

“The many excellent leadership and self-help books that proliferate actually change very little in the lives of most readers, no matter how excited and life-changing they find the contents,” according to Dr Aiken. “The appeal is at the cognitive level and bypasses the crucial experiential emotional learning that needs to happen over and over again before emotionally intelligent behaviour is really embedded.”

It starts with "me"

With the fast pace of life, many lose touch with their emotions and their reaction to events and situations are far more likely to happen unconsciously. But when you pay attention to your emotions you can come to trust your ability to not only manage them, but manage relationships better as well.

Dr Aiken says that emotional intelligence starts with “me”.

“As we raise our own levels of emotional intelligence, we increase our circle of positive influence in our world, be it at work or at home. It’s not rocket science: with daily practice and attention, we can grow EQ to bring well-being to ourselves and others.”

She suggests a few actions to become more in tune with your emotions:

- Take time to notice how you are feeling – on the way to work, in the car or at a meeting;

- Note what your body is telling you about how you feel;
- Notice times when you have taken responsibility and made a positive difference in someone's life;
- Try to stay in touch with uncomfortable feelings and notice what causes them;
- Recognise patterns or connections with your present and your past;
- Notice when you are judgmental or critical and when you are withholding empathy;
- Keep a diary and write down events in your day and the feelings they trigger. Reflect on the extent to which you have been aware of yourself: Did you manage emotions well? What were you aware of in interactions with others? Which relationships did you manage well today or not?

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