



A Practical Guide to Emotional Intelligence

HOW? A Practical Guide to **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Reading the Gauges & Pushing the Buttons

by Rose Fass

Two colleagues were talking about their business.

One said to the other, “I have a performance problem with one of the salespeople on my team and I can’t really talk to her about it now. I just came back from her wedding and it’s really awkward.” Without taking a breath, Sal fired off a response that personifies someone who has emotional intelligence – “You don’t go to weddings. You go to funerals – but you don’t go to weddings.”

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

A few years back, we got a call from an HR director at a large consumer products company. She wanted to talk to us about an executive named George. At the start of his career, George was one of the company's best salespeople. He outperformed everyone on his team and consistently made quota in every metric. George went on to run a sales team and again was in the top 10% of his peers year after year. The team did exactly what George told them to do and because he knew each of their territories as well as they did, it was hard to argue with George's direction. The company promoted George to run sales for their US Northeast region. And it was a train wreck.

As soon as we talked to George and the members of his Northeast leadership team, the problem jumped out at us. George had taken over from a very popular leader named Paula who seemed to have a magic touch with people. Everyone contrasted Paula's approachable, conversational style to George's formal, by-the-book manner. It was obvious that team members would go through a wall for Paula. They performed in spite of George, not because of him. We heard nothing but complaints about George – he was cold, he behaved as if nobody could do anything right, he obsessed over plans and analysis; he couldn't just talk with his people. Just about everything seemed wrong.

George knew he wasn't connecting with his people – but he didn't know why. He always got ahead by using his analytic mind. He decided to try what worked for him in the past – he called a meeting with the whole team and laid out his goals and objectives for the Region, how he planned to achieve them, and what he needed from them. The team acted insulted – as if they'd been dragged to a remedial performance 101 class. George knew it didn't go as planned but once again couldn't figure out what went wrong.

We asked George what he knew about emotional intelligence. We got an extraordinary answer. "I'm not going to spend my time talking about a lot of touchy-feely, personal stuff," George said with the first real passion we'd seen. "And I'm not dragging my personal life into my job either. If that's what it takes, maybe I'm not cut out for this."

George's assumption about emotional intelligence – that it's all about "soft, sensitive, private stuff" – is very common. We've met it before. But when you look at emotional intelligence as tapping in to people and how they work, you find that it's got nothing to do with laying out your private life for all to see. You can think of yourself as a human engineer; someone with an essential business skill that drives performance. In the same way George needed to know what made his customers tick, he needed to know what would move his people.

Emotional intelligence is an indispensable part of leadership. It's the secret sauce that gets people to follow their leader – and you can't call yourself a leader if no one wants to follow you.

Some leaders have an intuitive feel for their people. Whether they are conscious of it or not, these leaders have a high emotional intelligence quotient (EQ). Others will have to learn how to develop their emotional intelligence. The good news is that unlike your IQ, you can substantially increase your EQ. The first step is recognizing that it will transform the way you lead

people and the influence you have on others. It will significantly extend your professional reach. It's worth the investment.

The concept of emotional intelligence was first introduced to the mainstream in the mid 90's. Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence hit the press in 1995 and became a popular read among many business people, like Johnson's book *Who Moved My Cheese* published in 1998. For those who had emotional intelligence, they were finally able to validate its importance. For those who didn't, it broke the code.

There are several phrases we hear that describe people with emotional intelligence: He's got a good gut. She can read the tea leaves. He reads between the lines. Here's a simple one we heard in one of our workshops: It's how you read the gauges and push the buttons. You have to understand where people are coming from – that's reading the gauges. Knowing what to say, how to say it, and when to say it is pushing the buttons. Does it sound hard to do? For some, it comes naturally – for others you have to practice. One piece of advice that may help: trust your gut more. Don't talk yourself out of what feels right – yes, what feels right.

Read the Gauges

Reading the gauges is the first step. Think of how many times you've heard someone say, "I just don't get this guy – I can't read him." If your team is a closed book to you, chances are you are a closed book to them, too. Start by getting in touch with your emotional triggers. What sets you off? How can you use it instead of being used by it?

For example, the CEO of a mid-sized company we worked with complained that her corporate communications department never showed her anything substantial. We sat through a couple of sessions between this CEO and her communications team. We saw that the CEO was triggered by the smallest typo. Even the difference between an en dash and an em dash leapt off the page at her. (That's the difference between this "–" and this "—" in the text.) As soon as the CEO saw one of these errors, she wasn't interested in the content. Typos were her trigger and they shut her down.

Should this CEO have just stopped worrying about typos in important work? Of course not. But her trigger meant that her team could not show her anything in draft. It also meant that she missed the content that was in front of her when she was triggered by a typo. Knowing how her trigger worked helped her get past it. The communications team started getting the feedback they needed, the CEO started seeing the content she wanted and she even confessed that she was getting cleaner copy as the team lost its sense of never being able to please her.

Read Your Own Gauges

What triggers you is one of your own personal gauges. Another is how people see you. For example, one executive in an organization we worked with was a terrible project manager who blamed his people whenever something went wrong. He often referred to them as clueless. Interestingly, he had no idea how his people felt about working for him. They called him

“Mr. Wonderful,” which was code for “Mr. Disaster.” At a performance review with his boss, this executive was asked about the poor relationship between him and his team. “What are you talking about?” he asked with frank amazement, “They love me! They even call me Mr. Wonderful!” His boss realized how out of touch this executive was with his team, and that was the final straw that led to his termination.

You can’t afford to be clueless, but you don’t need to be a mind reader, either – you just need to pay attention. Here are a few things to bear in mind:

- **Nobody likes “perfect people.”** Worse no one trusts perfect people. Someone who works at doing everything perfectly and not showing any chinks in their armor comes off as fake. It turns people off. We are all flawed – it’s what it means to be human. People are strongly attracted to someone who is self-effacing. And the dirty little secret is that you get more regard. It makes you real. It forges a connection with people. They feel comfortable around leaders who show their muddy shoes – and they’ll be a lot more likely to come to you with theirs.
- **Don’t rush to fix things.** There’s a big difference between being a strong leader and a “super doer.” Resist the urge to take over work you think you could do better. You’re there to guide others – not do it for them. Your job is to set clear goals and objectives, clear the clutter and manage to the outcomes.
- **Take other views on board.** Don’t be closed to what your team has to say. Even when you have a very clear idea of what you want, talk with your team, not at them. You may be surprised by what they contribute. If you are closed to your team’s input and don’t actively enlist their collaboration, you may miss an opportunity. They may also take a page out of your book and work the same way – closed off and every man for himself.
- **Seek out feedback.** Let other people tell you from time to time how they feel about working for you. This will give you a reading for how you come across. You don’t have to do this all the time – pick the occasions that make sense. When you seek this feedback, truly listen. Don’t become defensive or push your own opinion.

Read Your People’s Gauges

We worked with a CEO who had been the CFO before he took over his company. Saying he was a numbers guy was the understatement of the year. He sounded like a math teacher every time he pulled his senior team together – he cited facts and figures and completely turned them off. His slides looked like he put everything on his laptop in an excel spread sheet that no one could make heads or tails of. But this CEO had been successful in his career up to this point by always having the number. He found it terribly hard to let go of what he was comfortable with even though it did nothing to move the performance of his team.

Unfortunately, this CEO did not make it. The board recognized his financial talent but saw that he lacked the ability to convey a bigger picture and take his company forward. The greater misfortune was that this CEO left the company perplexed and

unable to concede that he had caused his own demise.

The flipside of this coin is a team we worked with that liked competing for stretch assignments. There was good natured “one-upsmanship” on the team. The leader of this team knew what they were like and she played on their competitive nature to step up performance. It worked because she could read her people. Using this approach on every team would not necessarily get the same result. But this team leader – unlike the fired CEO – knew that it’s all about reading the gauges. Here are a few things to look for:

- **Different strokes for different folks.** Your team is not you. What turns you on and off may not be what turns your people on and off. You may be the type of person who likes to know what’s expected and when it’s needed. Once you’re clear on the expectation, you’ll figure out what you need to do and how to do it. Someone else may want more detail and more face time. Others like to work independently but also like being in contact with the person they work for. They enjoy the relationship, but don’t need a lot of oversight. We use a tool called Touch/Task in our work that helps leaders get a sense of how to balance the relationship with an individual with the work you need them to do. Reading the “how I like to interact with you” gauge is critical to making the tool work. Once leaders figure out the right balance between connecting with individuals and managing the work, they have far more effective interactions with their teams.
- **Give them what they need to succeed.** No matter what industry you’re in, your team needs resources to do their job. They need tools and methods, the right level of guidance from you and the time to do their work. In the real world, people always have to work around something that’s missing – not enough information, time or money, for example. Good teams can handle pressure up to a point, but keep your eye on the “I’m asking too much and we have too little to work with” gauge. When the needle on this gauge moves into the red, people will start to snap at each other, complain that not everyone is pulling their weight and perhaps complain about you as well.
- **Read between the lines.** Any experienced Wall Street hand will tell you that numbers are only part of the story. Read between the lines when you evaluate the performance of your people. How do they sound when you talk to them? What body language do they use? If you need to add another project this week or up the ante, will they slide up a notch and keep humming while they get the job done, or will they burst with the added strain? You need personal contact with your people to get a sense of whether this gauge is in the red.

Reading the gauges is vital – but it is only half the story. Armed with this information, you need to push the right buttons – take your readings and change how your team sees you, works with you and delivers the performance you need.

Push the Buttons

If your company or business ran smoothly and profitably every day of the week, you’d have a lot less to worry about. You’re a leader precisely because business is a lot more complex with many more moving parts. There are multiple options and different levels of risk depending on the course you take. Your team needs direction from you. Everyone needs to pull together

toward the end goal. When you push the right buttons, you get everyone lined up behind you. This is at the core of what it means to be a leader. You deal with the conflicts, make direction clear, get commitment and keep people focused on what's important.

- **The conflict – cooling it down button.** When people start to raise their voices, situations spiral rapidly out of control. This can happen in moments face to face or it can be a slow burn over days in emails. The more people lock horns, the less it is about the work. Press the “cool down” button by reframing the conversation. Take it out of the personal and back to the basic business problem. What unsatisfied need got this whole thing started? Be impartial, rational and business focused. When tempers flare, be ready to press this button quickly.
- **The conflict – heating it up button.** Is there ever a time to press the “heat it up” button? Absolutely. Posing a conflict can spark creativity, innovation, healthy competition and performance. When your team seems to be lukewarm, you want to generate some heat. Be sure that you are reading your people's gauges when you press this button – otherwise, your attempt may backfire.
- **The simple button.** If your people are locked up, overwhelmed or don't know what to do next, press the “simple” button. Give them the three things they need to focus on. Keep the language simple and the message clear. Stop and check that everyone understands. Paint a picture for them and illustrate how they fit in that picture. People need to know what success looks like – show them. Give them a context in plain words. Make it simple so it sticks.
- **The commitment button.** Walk the talk. Behave the way you want your team to behave. Work the way you want them to work. Treat customers the way you want them to treat customers. Let others see you're totally in it with them. Be authentic about this – people can smell an impostor. Appreciate others in public for getting committed themselves. Use this button sparingly and for what's really important – if you go to the well on everything, your people will register a high reading on their “commitment fatigue” gauge.
- **The motivate button.** Everybody has a “motivate” button, but it's not the same for everyone. Some are motivated by money – show them how they can earn more dollars and they'll take it up a notch. Others are motivated by acknowledgment – praise their work or accomplishments and they'll go to the wall for you. Some want to know how they can advance in their career – knowing you are helping them achieve their career goals is their motivation. It is important to have a handle on what matters to each person on your team. It will serve you as a leader and positively impact the performance of the team.
- **The stepping out of character button.** For many of us, we have a style that we are comfortable with and others are accustomed to. There are times when changing it up can be useful. Pushing the “out of character” button can change perspective, get a different reaction and often a better result.

As a leader, you have to know what buttons to push, when to push them and how to push them. One of our executive clients used this approach in meetings with his senior team. This guy had served a stretch in the military before his corporate career. He spoke his mind and had a clear voice that carried. When his meetings got off track, he would lower his voice and speak in a

calm, low keyed manner. Once the team picked up on the change in style, the room would suddenly get quiet. You could hear a pin drop. He knew what they expected – he had read their gauges – and he knew what buttons to press to play it differently. By speaking in a different tone and volume he stopped endless debate and got everyone focused. He was pressing both the “cool it down” and the “stepping out of character” buttons. It took only a moment, and it was effective. For a quiet, even keeled leader, raising your voice and acting with a bit more fire would have the same effect. The key is to know yourself, know your people and push the right buttons.

Emotional intelligence plays a key role in our effectiveness as leaders, our influence on others and in getting high performance from our teams. We work with leaders who do it well. For them, there is nothing artificial – it’s a natural part of their leadership. It’s not about being soft – it’s about being practical and getting the job done. For all who have struggled with this concept, remember this is not exclusive to one type of person. You don’t have to be an extrovert or love being around people to have it. There are leaders who have it that are private and more introverted. Observe people you know who have it. Watch how they read gauges and push buttons. Then take what you think would work for you and try it. Keep trying. Tap into people on your team who have it – where appropriate, you can ask if you’re reading the gauge right. Remember, you don’t have to be perfect; you just have pay attention and be willing to practice.

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