

# Finding your Edge

Developing Emotional Intelligence  
for an Effective Public Service

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## Introduction

I was made to throw all the emotions that had been expressed to the back of my mind or even forget them and not use them. Now as I am reflecting, I understand that once emotions are out, those emotions are there, they reflect what my staff and I are feeling-that is what we brought with us.

What I need to do is that in a less emotionally charged moment, I must decide and I need to use those emotions and not put them aside or ignore them any longer.

**These are the words that a participant in my research shared with me as I interviewed her about the place that emotions are given in her role as a manager (Kenely, 2008, p.254). These words have stayed with me as I continued to research, teach, and coach people on emotional intelligence and the role that emotions have in the workplace. Working with people means working with emotions. We have often heard the argument...**

... “Don’t bring your personal problems to work”, implying that emotions are inappropriate in the workplace. The argument continues that business decisions should be based on information, logic, and cool reason, with emotions kept to a minimum. In fact, for a long time, emotions and rationality were considered to be at the opposite ends of a wide spectrum—two constructs that could never possibly meet, nor be considered together in the same sentence. Our understanding of intelligence evolved during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to take into consideration certain aspects of intelligence that go beyond the cognitive components.

I have found it to be clearly unrealistic to suppose that emotions can be checked at the door when you arrive at work.

I strongly believe that we cannot be emotionally neutral without coming across as rigid and detached. However, neither are emotions to be displayed excessively. Just being around such people can be exhausting. Therefore, being able to use both rationality and emotion in relationships, in decision-making, in dealing with conflicts, in leadership, and in life is what defines an emotionally intelligent person. Being emotionally intelligent can give public service officers an edge and help them thrive and succeed in the workplace. Consequently, the greater the level of emotional intelligence of workers employed in the public domain, the better the service they provide. This reflects itself very obviously in the fact that the Public Service prides itself in its Appreciation Awards. A cursory glance at the website description of these awards indicates that the

Public Service seeks to honour the “high-quality services in the public sector”. The Public Service strives for excellence and recognises it where it sees it. Particularly striking is the fact that “this year the recognition will also be based on a more individual level. It will be an opportunity to recognise employees who not only have at heart the common good of society, but who, through their dedication and diligence in the execution of their duties, have shown what it means to go the extra mile beyond the call of duty” ([publicservice.com.mt](http://publicservice.com.mt)). People will not go the extra mile if they are not satisfied with their experience of working in the Public Service, if they do not find a climate that allows them to thrive and grow, and an organisational ethos that recognises effort and supports development. All these are tenets of EI.





### continuous improvement of people performance and wellbeing, and sustaining quality service...

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In fact, new research conducted at the University of Haifa “supports the emerging recognition that the understanding and managing of emotions play a significant role in the work of public service providers alongside the so-called ‘rational’ aspects of their work” (University of Haifa, 2016). The results show that the greater the emotional intelligence of workers, the more they are motivated to serve the public, and the greater their job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and the quality of service they provide. These are qualities that the People and Standards Division within the Public Service of Malta surely desires in its employees and managers/directors. In fact, the Division asserts that it “value[s] people and empower[s] them to achieve a Service of Excellence for the entire Public Service” and, according to their mission statement, “continuous

improvement of people performance and wellbeing, and sustaining quality service” are two of their major priorities (People and Standards Division, [publicservice.com.mt](http://publicservice.com.mt)).

This suggests the need to ensure an organisational climate within the different public services in which employees not only survive and work well enough, but also thrive and excel in their service to the public. Emotional intelligence, as I will describe in this article, has been shown to have a critical role in the creation of such a climate. It has a lot to contribute towards the workplace as more and more research connects it with the creation of strong bonds and interpersonal relationships among employees in the workplace. Research has also documented the positive correlation of emotional intelligence with the successful results achieved by an

organisation (Clarke, 2010; Rozell & Scroggins, 2010). According to Tarricone and Luca (2002), creating a progressive and supportive working environment requires a combination of technical skills and developed emotional intelligence. These authors link EI to increased motivation and argue that people imbued with it work with passion and perseverance, take initiatives, show dedication, are committed to the objectives and common goals of the organisation above their personal ones, and have a sincere interest in team achievements.

This article will describe emotional intelligence, explore the role that emotional intelligence has in the workplace, and explain the benefits of emotionally intelligent leadership in the workplace.

## What is Emotional Intelligence?

The literature on Emotional Intelligence (EI) presents several different definitions of this concept. However, core elements of EI zero in on the following elements: self-awareness, emotional resilience, motivation, interpersonal sensitivity, influence, intuitiveness, conscientiousness, and integrity (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2000).

Emotional intelligence is a set of competencies that can be learnt. It is not a magic trick but rather something that can be developed the more you focus on it. In lay terms, EI is the ability to understand and manage your own emotions and those of the people around you. People with a high degree of emotional intelligence know what they're feeling, what their emotions mean, and how these emotions can affect the people around them. One of the most popular authors on EI, Goleman (1995), says that cognitive skill 'gets you in the door' of a company, but emotional skill helps you thrive once you are hired.

As I am sure we have found out in our relationships with others, human beings are psychologically very complex. They are not only motivated by reason and intelligence, but are also subject to a range of emotions which can motivate them strongly. EI, in fact, has also been positively linked to various indices of wellbeing such as greater life satisfaction, higher self-esteem, higher self-acceptance, positive affect, positive social interaction, and better health (Koydemir & Schutz, 2012).

EI can be described in terms of 4 dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

*Self-awareness* is the ability of an individual to be in tune with their own feelings and to recognise the impact that their feelings have on others. Being self-aware means that you understand yourself—you understand what makes you tick and, therefore, your strengths and weaknesses as a person. You can then start to understand *why* you feel and what *makes* you feel. If you understand your emotions, you can identify their impact on you and others in your team. I must add that it is exceptionally difficult to understand the emotions and motivations of others if you do not know yourself first. Being self-aware means that you are in touch with what is going on inside you, giving yourself the possibility to be more in control of how you behave in the shadow of that emotional state. Walking into the office first thing in the morning, unaware that you are already laden with frustration and anger, could spell chaos in the way you will proceed through the day with your colleagues.

*Self-management* or self-regulation is the ability to keep negative emotions and impulsive behaviour under control, stay calm, and unflustered even under stressful situations, maintaining a clear and focused mind directed on accomplishing a task. Those who are skilled in self-regulation excel in managing conflict, adapt well to change, and are more likely to take on responsibility. This ability is closely linked to the previous one (awareness), since how can I regulate myself if I am not aware of myself? Therefore imagine you are actually aware that you are angry or frustrated because of something that is going on in your life, or because of a situation that you encountered on your way to the office. Self-regulation means that you take



time to process what you are feeling, realise what the consequences of acting from within that anger may be, and control how you will behave with the first person you meet who presses the wrong button in you, whether it is a colleague or a customer—internal or external.

*Social awareness* is the ability to read or sense other people's emotions and how they impact on the situation of interest or concern. Socially aware people are skilled in empathy. They have the ability to recognise and understand how others are feeling and consider those feelings before responding in social situations. Empathy also allows an individual to understand the dynamics that influence relationships, both personal and in the workplace. A socially aware and empathic person is able to notice that a colleague is not her usual self; that her non-verbals are showing some sadness or anxiety; can pick up emotion in the tone of voice of a colleague; and acknowledge what he is noticing. This skill makes others around us feel "seen".

*Relationship management* is the ability to influence, guide, and handle other people's emotions. People skilled in this dimension are great communicators and use their abilities to build rapport and connect with people through skills such as active listening, verbal, and nonverbal communication. Relationships at work are crucial in maintaining a climate that makes people happy to go to work. That happiness results in better productivity and a more effective service. People possessing these skills are the ones who will not let conflicts fester, the first ones in a board meeting to diffuse a tense situation, and who can help colleagues see others' point of view.

We are emotional beings just as much as we are social beings, capable of experiencing strong feelings, and

it is within relationships that we experience and live most of these emotions. Therefore, the more able we are to understand ourselves on a level of feeling, the more skilled we can become in our social interactions (Kenely, 2019, p. 23). This applies in particular to our ability to regulate our emotions—in other words, our response to stimuli in the workplace that may cause a strong emotive reaction within us.

### Do emotions in the workplace matter?

When I ask this question during training sessions, the resounding reply is: 'Yes of course they do!' And that definitely is the correct answer. Emotion cannot be separated from today's organisational life (Hyun, 2013). The workplace may be viewed as a distinct social community that is separate from our personal lives but which is so deeply and inextricably intertwined with them. As I have explained above, higher EI allows people to understand themselves and others better, communicate more effectively, and cope with challenging situations. Therefore, using and developing emotional intelligence in the workplace can significantly improve the personal and social competencies of individuals within that workplace—both in terms of interpersonal relationships between employees, as well as the relationships between employees and customers (internal and external).

There is for example, an undeniable relationship between emotional intelligence and the way senior executives manage their employees—managers with higher emotional intelligence have the tools at their disposal to not only manage stress but to also recognise and address stress in others. The role of managers in the creation of an emotionally intelligent





climate in the workplace is pivotal. I will explore EI with reference to leadership in the last part of this article.

If we think of emotional intelligence in terms of managing stress and building relationships, the link between emotional intelligence skills and job performance is clear, with stress management positively impacting job commitment and satisfaction. I am sure we have all experienced how the mood in a team may change suddenly by the actions, attitudes, and behaviours of one person in that team, especially if that person is the leader. However, it is important to point out that EI

does not only apply at management level. Employees across the whole hierarchy with sophisticated emotional intelligence skills have the desire and ability to establish and maintain high-quality relationships in the workplace (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003). Additionally, individuals with high EI are better equipped to effectively manage conflicts and, in turn, sustain relationships within the workplace when compared to those with low to moderate levels of EI. Conversely, people with low EI wreak havoc in the boardroom, in the office, and in the kitchenette! EI is an important factor in job performance both

on an individual and group level. Developing EI in the workplace means acknowledging that emotions are always present and doing something intelligent with them. This something intelligent is what is termed as emotion regulation. It is paramount within the workplace.

The late Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychologist, and Holocaust survivor is known to have said, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response.” This is extremely important in the workplace where each employee needs to learn how to pause and think of the



consequences of their reaction to an emotional stimulus. How many times have we reacted and regretted it immediately? We made someone feel bad, we yelled, we participated in gossip, we pressed send on our email without re-reading it, we wounded with words...all without taking the time to think and reflect before responding. The result is broken relationships, a negative team climate, and toxic work environments.

The rules of the workplace are rapidly changing; a new yardstick is being used to judge people. How often have we heard it said that a high IQ (Intelligence Quotient) may assure you a top position. However, today's research clearly indicates that this does not necessarily make you a top person. This new yardstick does not measure how smart you are or what your academic qualifications are or even what your expertise is. Instead it measures how well you are able to handle yourself and others. This yardstick is increasingly applied in deciding who will be hired and who will not, who will be dismissed and who will be retained, who will be ignored and who will be promoted. These new rules predict who is most likely to be successful and who is most likely to fail (Tokpam, Saikia, & Borah, 2015).

The Public Service may be compared to a living organism—an organism that is in continuous growth and development. Any organisation wishing to thrive through change must make the choice to promote and allow employee expressions of emotional intelligence (Hunton, Hall & Price, 1998). The Public Service in Malta has been going and will continue to go through dynamic change, and developing these EI capabilities

within the workforce will give it the edge it requires to survive and succeed in its mission.

### Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

As an individual moves up an organisational hierarchy, the positive effect of emotional intelligence on coping with situations and doing tasks in effective ways increases (Moghadam, Tehrani & Amin, 2011). Research has shown that the technically expert department head will get superior results if they also know how to stay motivated under stress, motivate others, navigate complex interpersonal relationships, inspire others, and build teams. On the other hand, a manager who is emotionally volatile, who verbally abuses employees or is emotionally disengaged or absent from the people they lead, is not a leader anyone would like to be working for. Managers who consistently outperform their peers not only have technical knowledge and experience but also, more importantly, utilise the strategies associated with EI to manage conflict, reduce stress and, as a result, improve their success. Caruso and Salovey (2004) assert, “the integration of rational and emotional styles is key to successful leadership” (p.3).

According to Gardner and Stough (2002), emotionally intelligent leaders are happier and more committed to their organisation, achieve greater success, perform better in the workplace, take advantage of and use positive emotions to envision major improvements in organisational functioning, use emotions to improve their decision-making, and instill a sense of

enthusiasm, trust, and co-operation in other employees through interpersonal relationships (p.68). This is undoubtedly the kind of leaders the Public Service needs and seeks.

The principles of emotional intelligence resonate very closely with the characteristics of Transformational Leaders—the leadership model that is held as the embodiment of effective leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gardner and Stough (2002) found evidence that supports the existence of a strong relationship between transformational leadership and overall emotional intelligence. Successful leaders who are able to manage positive and negative emotions within themselves and within others are able to articulate a vision for the future, talk optimistically, provide encouragement and meaning, stimulate in others new ways of doing things, encourage the expression of new ideas, and intervene in problems before they become serious (p.76). All of these are also characteristics of emotionally intelligent transformational leaders.





## Conclusion

Emotional intelligence competencies can be improved through training and thus provide the Public Service with an excellent means of identifying potential areas for improvement, as well as measuring the effectiveness of individual and organisational development programmes (Kenely, 2008).

This article highlighted how the most cognitively intelligent or highly qualified person for a position may not necessarily have the emotional make-up required to handle the stresses of the job environment—especially within a setting like the Public Service.

We have seen how emotional intelligence is the juncture at which cognition and emotion meet. EI facilitates our capacity for resilience, motivation, empathy, reasoning, stress management, communication, and our ability

to read and navigate many social situations and conflicts—whether you are an administrator, a clerk, a manager, or a director within the Public Service. Emotional intelligence is undoubtedly a valuable tool to utilise in the face of adversity; it has the potential to enhance not only leadership abilities and teamwork effectiveness but also personal resilience (Kenely, 2019). EI gives you an edge! EI gives the Public Service the edge it requires to continue to satisfy and exceed the 4 pillars of service standards it has set itself—to be the voice and

understanding of the customer; to design and implement policies and services that meet customer expectations; to deliver a quality service; and to be accountable in such a way that people become part of the excellence of the service provided.

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