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Advisory Article

Better Project Management through Better
Emotional Intelligence
by Dhruv Lahon

Better Project Management through Better Emotional Intelligence

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Why?

Enormous amount of studies on successful and failed projects have shown that the Emotional Intelligence of the Project Manager running the project has significant influence on the outcome of the project.

So, this paper talks about emotional intelligence in general, and then tries to relate to how the emotional intelligence influences the project outcomes. Let's start with learning some basic theories about emotional intelligence.

"88% of Project Managers spend more than 50% of time cooperating with others."

What is Emotional Intelligence?

In very basic terms, emotional intelligence is a person's ability to identify and understand one's own and others emotions correctly, and manage those emotions in a desired manner.

Daniel Goleman, one of the pioneer researchers in the field of Emotional Science, views emotional intelligence as "abilities such as being able to motivate one and persist in the face of frustration; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to emphasize and to hope".

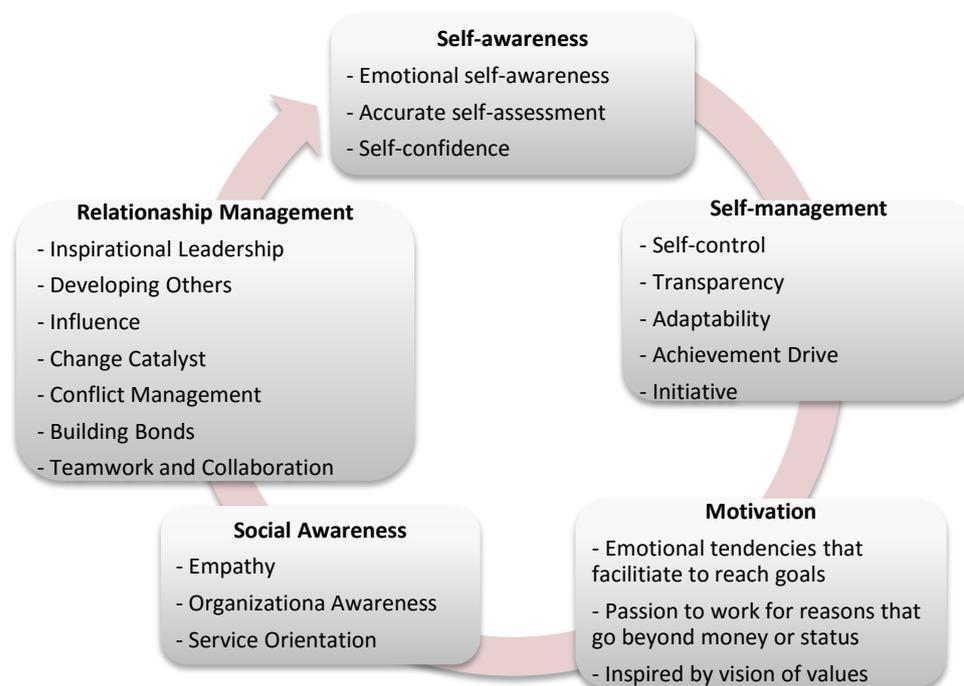There are four unique primary emotional states –

- *Glad*
- *Sad*
- *Mad*
- *Scared*

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Some researchers claim existence of two additional emotional states, but other researchers contradict saying that these are extension or mix of one or more unique primary emotional states.

So, any project manager, being a human, at any point of time goes through one of these four emotional states, but it may vary person to person based on the life experience, emotional maturity and so on.

Goleman's Mixed Model of Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Self-awareness
- Emotional self-awareness
- Accurate self-assessment
- Self-confidence

Self-management
- Self-control
- Transparency
- Adaptability
- Achievement Drive
- Initiative

Relationship Management
- Inspirational Leadership
- Developing Others
- Influence
- Change Catalyst
- Conflict Management
- Building Bonds
- Teamwork and Collaboration

Social Awareness
- Empathy
- Organizationa Awareness
- Service Orientation

Motivation
- Emotional tendencies that facilitiate to reach goals
- Passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status
- Inspired by vision of values

Goleman talked about a mixed model of Emotional Intelligence which is broadly divided into two categories - *personal* and *social* competences.

Personal emotional intelligence is the ability of a person to understand and manage one's emotion, particularly mental moods, processes and reactions so that they do not distract the rational mental state needed to make a right decision.

The *personal* competence area consists of 3 unique steps –

(a) *Self-awareness* is individuals' ability to understand, analyze and assess their own emotional state and feelings in a certain situation or environment. This requires a person to detach himself/herself from the situation and to have an

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outside-in perspective into the situation in an unbiased manner. Self-aware individuals use their judgement for decision-making.

(b) *Self-management* is individuals' ability to use self-awareness and adapt and react to the situation in a desired way. Effective self-control, conscientiousness are the key here.

(c) *Motivation* represents individuals' emotional tendencies that help and push a person to reach for the goals and objectives. This differs from person to person. Some may be inspired and motivated by vision or values or tough objectives, there are many who have a passion to work for reasons other than monetary benefits.

Social competences are defined as an ability of a person to know and deal with the "self of others", particularly to gain insight into others' emotional worlds by using empathy and interrelation skills to produce socially desirable outcomes for themselves and others

(a) *Social awareness* allows a person to feel, perceive and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. This is a key skill for both professional and social success. Having and showing empathy to other's emotions and behavior is the primary concern of social awareness. Empathy allows a person to think from other person's point of view and understand his or her reactions in a particular situation. It helps to form an emotional connection between people with deeper mutual understanding.

(b) *Relationship management* consists of individual's abilities to use interpersonal skills to influence positive changes and outcomes in others. For example – how does a person positively influence in a conflict situation. Some other key skills in this area are - effective communication and collaboration, building networks and leading by example, which are a must for teamwork development.

Goleman argues that while intellectual intelligence is essential to reach a particular level for high performance and success, it is the emotional intelligence that defines the progress beyond this minimum achievement.

The very interesting fact that will be of interest to everyone is that all these competences described above are learnable through experience, disciplined effort. Anyone willing to reach success beyond minimum achievement must therefore constantly develop and refine these personal and social competences.

People at higher levels of management require increasingly higher levels of emotional intelligence.

In a project management context, there are many researchers suggest that Emotional Intelligence may hold a key to improved project manager performance. But at the same time there are some researchers who doubt whether project managers with high EI would perform better irrespective of the project and its complexity. Tasks in project management that need more interpersonal actions (e.g. communication) are defined by EI than tasks requiring cognitive ability (e.g. marketing). Since the role of project manager generally includes more interpersonal actions and communication than traditional functional manager's role, it is a must for project manager to have higher level of emotional intelligence.

Even though in a matrix organization project human resources do not have a reporting relationship to the Project Manager, there are numerous avenues where project manager influences the team to make the project activities happen. The project manager needs to communicate with all involved stakeholders, from varied functions – R&D, Procurement, Sales & Marketing, Technical Support and so on. The resources that a project manager needs to accomplish the project objectives are not in abundance, they are scarce. This demand from multiple parties for the same resources leads to conflict. How well the project managers handle these conflicts?

Most project managers have a detailed plan on what is to be done, who will do it, and when it will be done and so on. But lot of the planned stuff do not go as planned, there will be delay in schedule, the critical resources in middle of projects etc., which give enough reasons for the project manager and other stakeholders to be angry. How do the project managers handle this anger? Does the project manager need to display the anger? Shall the team be reprimanded?

Many people who are 'book smart' but lack EI end up working for people who have lower IQs than they but who excel in EI skills.

Emotions in Project/Organization Leadership

Researchers focused on individual's ability to understand social environment argue that emotions are the central for making analytical decisions. And the ability to make right decisions all the time is one of the key skills of leaders.

How does a project team behave within the team decides the success or failure of a project. One of the most effective ways to get the project team doing all needed to meet the project requirements is having a positive, motivated, conducive and committed environment. Effective project managers create such a team environment where all workers work as a team to achieve the project objectives.

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So how do the leaders need to handle their emotions? Do they need to make their emotions visible to the team?

There are some leaders who chose to completely hide their emotions and ensure that their behavior do not reflect their emotional state, where as there are some leaders who just let their emotions outburst in an uncontrolled manner. Both the extremes are not going to help the leader and the team anyway. Various practical experiments have found that leaders showing their own emotions, (anger, disappointment, gladness) in a controlled manner lead to improved decision-making process or the ability to achieve results as an individual and also as a team. Generally, display of angry emotions is considered as a weakness, but emotionally intelligent individuals can effectively exhibit controlled anger expressions to achieve desired outcomes.

Negotiating is another area where leaders/project managers need to deal with regularly. It is specifically needed in the areas of resources in demand, timeline / schedule etc. and it involves communicating, influencing, debating with other people. For effective negotiations the most critical human trait needed is *Empathy*. It needs one's ability to put himself/herself in the other person's shoes and think from their perspectives. The emotionally intelligent people are generally empathetic which makes them more successful in negotiations.

Some interesting numbers:

Top Performers - EI ratio of 2:1 to technical skills

Project Leaders - EI = 85% of what sets top performers apart

Teams with Leaders with high EI perform 20% above other teams

Computer Programmers - top 10% based on EI are 320% more effective

Highly effective leaders have strengths in 6 or more of the 20 EI competencies

Self-confidence is another personal emotional skill that to a large extent defines how a person (or PM in this context) does behave under different emotional state or constraint. A self-confident person generally tends to think rationally, in a controlled emotional manner under stressful unpleasant situations which helps him/her to make a well informed and well-judged decision. A person who is not self-confident can suffer from "amygdala hijack" symptom which can seriously paralyze the rational thinking ability and subsequent the decision making process.
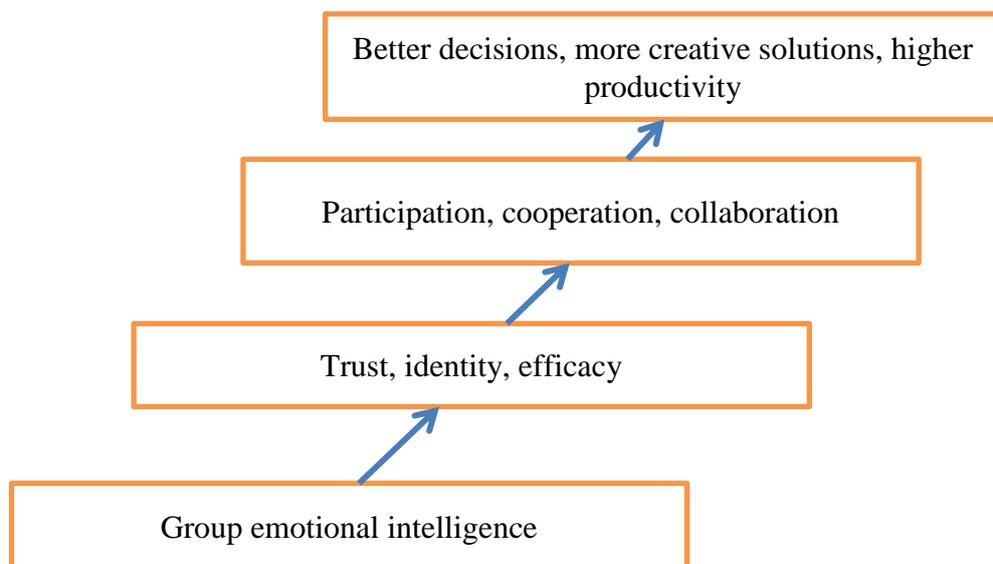
Relationship Management is the most critical team and organizational skill for project success. All of skills mentioned in the previous chapter play a significant impact on the success or failure of any project or organizational initiative. A

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project or an organization is not made up of one person; it will be a group of people trying to achieve a common goal. As a normal human nature, everyone is unique in one way or other and it brings in conflicts and differences of opinions into the way to achieve the common goal. It's the leader's responsibility to ensure that every one - has a common vision / goal, is inspired, and works as a collaborative team with trust in each other to achieve the common goal.

"Organizations tend to hire people based on their experiences and qualifications but it is their emotional intelligence that determines whether or not they will be effective in the role."

Projects are almost all the time uncertain in nature and complex in characteristic. This makes it utmost critical that project managers possess emotional intelligence competencies. Another important aspect of projects is that they are always temporary; they start at one point of time and run for a certain duration, and then end. They do not run forever. It requires the project manager to develop project team's trust and commitment rapidly; this is building effective interpersonal relationships, and it requires the project manager to have social competence and relationship management.

Another aspect of leadership related to emotional intelligence is the leader's ability to understand emotions of others, predict mood fluctuations under different circumstances. This skill supports the leaders to have a more tactful effective communication with the team, to influence and inspire the team work towards the common goal. Leaders having this skill to read the emotional signals from others can adapt their communication style, body language as they continue to appraise the emotions of others in the context, in the best interest of all the parties involved.

Better decisions, more creative solutions, higher productivity

Participation, cooperation, collaboration

Trust, identity, efficacy

Group emotional intelligence

A Model of Team Effectiveness (Druskat and Wolff 2001a)

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Negative impact of Low Emotional Intelligence in Project Managers/Leaders

Project failure rates are very high (only 37% is successful), and interestingly much of the project failures is not related to knowledge, know how, but due to project participant's lack of social intelligence, personal skills, poor leadership, inadequate communication, and inability to solve conflicts. In other words, failures seem to depend largely on human side of project management rather than the other aspects.

The same applies to organizational leadership, there are many organization failures lead due to inadequate emotional maturity in leaders.

Low emotional intelligence and maturity in leaders leave the team in disarray, uninspired and unmotivated state. The leader is not able to understand the team's emotions as well as his/her own emotions, which will never allow them to see through a common goal. It will be like many people on a boat rowing in different directions.

At the same time, the decisions taken by leaders with low emotional intelligence have a greater chance of failure, due to the fact that the decisions will not be very thought through and without much of rational thinking.

Amygdala Hijack

There is another important topic that has significant impact on emotional intelligence is called "Amygdala Hijack".
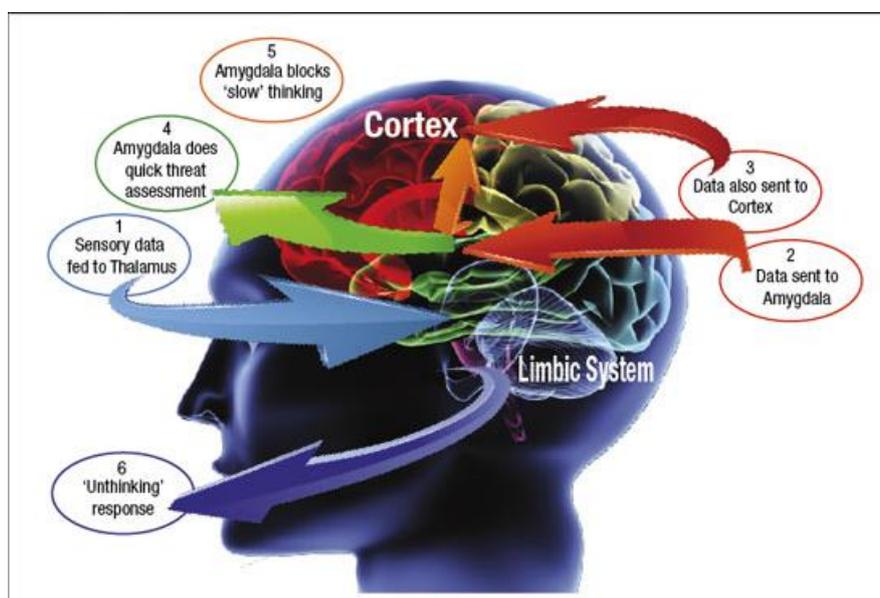
We all have had the experience of reacting in an undesirable way in the heat of the moment that we regretted later. We could not think rationally during that time, and hence ended up behaving irrationally. And with that reaction you not only surprised yourself, but also all around you. You might be thinking later what happened to you? In reality you were being hijacked at that time, not physically, but from your rational mind. This is called "Amygdala Hijack" – a term coined by Daniel Goleman.

Preventing this hijack from happening is very critical for leaders, as a few seconds of outbursts from a leader can completely diminish the leader's reputation.

Few famous examples of this hijack –

- Zinedine Zindane head butting Marco Materazzi in 2006 world cup final
- Mike Tyson biting Evander Hollyfield's ear in a 1997 boxing match
- Most of road rage incidents are due to this hijack

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How does this hijack happen?

(Image courtesy: www.progressivedairy.com)

If you look at the above picture, one can clearly understand the way it happens.

1. The stimuli from the sensory organ (eyes/ears) goes to Thalamus
2. From there the data is sent to Amygdala, it reaches amygdala before cortex
3. Data is also sent to Cortex
4. But before cortex performs rational thinking, amygdala does a quick threat assessment
5. Amygdala hijacks cortex, and it blocks the slow thinking process
6. At the end, unthinking responses are exhibited

How do I prevent "Amygdala Hijack" from happening?

There is a tool called "Emotional Audit" which can help with self-awareness and self-management. It has a set of strategic questions that need to be asked himself/herself when the hijack is about to begin.

What am I thinking?

What am I feeling?

What do I want now?

How am I getting in my way?

What do I need to do differently?

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Successful leaders can anticipate when and under what situations amygdala hijack can happen, and hence they take these preventive actions to ensure that it does not really impact their top performance. When the above questions are asked own-self, it helps the person to bring in awareness back and then forces to realize what actions need to be taken up differently to achieve what is targeted for.

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Dhrubajyoti Lahon (Dhruv) is currently with Philips India Ltd. in Bangalore, India as a Senior Project Manager in the Healthcare domain. The two main responsibilities in his current role are – group management involving people management aspect and also managing the delivery from the group.

He is an engineering graduate in Computer Science & Engineering. Dhruv has been working in the Software industry for last 16 years, also with experience working in different domains like building automation system, retail inventory management and healthcare. He was previously associated with Honeywell, Tyco International and ABB.

Dhruv's deepest interest is in the areas of Project and Organizational Management, and the various human factors that influence the success of a project or an organization.

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