

Leading in Moments of Change, Conflict and Crisis¹

Employing Emotional Intelligence as a Tool for Agile Scrum Masters and Project Managers

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Emotional Intelligence and its Utility for Leading Scrum and Project Teams

The objective of this paper is to share why Emotional Intelligence (EI) is useful, what it is, and how one can use it to advance leadership best practices in Project Management and Scrum teams. The working definition of EI as used in this paper is based on the definition of EI proposed by Salovey and Mayer: *Emotional intelligence is the ability to monitor one's own as well as other's emotions. Then managing these feelings to guides one's own, and other's, actions* (1990, p. 189).

Why EI is Important

“The special relevance to leadership revolves around the fact that leadership is an emotion-laden process, both from a leader and a follower perspective (George, p. 12).” In support of this, Dr. Goleman, who popularized the idea of EI, indicated “EI makes up about 2/3 of the ingredients of star performance (2006, p. 187).” Thus, if one wants to be a star leader of a project team, he or she should develop EI skills. Dr. Goleman also indicates that people who have advanced control of their emotional self make for better listeners, and this is a core building block of leadership skills (2006, p. 240). In Goleman's 1997 book he identifies traits of an emotionally intelligent person that are well suited toward excellence in leadership: self-control, zeal, persistence, and self-motivation (p. xii).

If we look specifically at EI's impact on leadership, here are some of Dr. Nadler's findings:

- “EI determines your leadership success, contributing as much as 85-90% (p. 8). “
- “People who possess high EI are the ones who truly succeed in work”(p. 9). “

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- Leaders who possess a high EI are found to be more “adaptable, resilient, and optimistic (p. 9).”

In another work, there is further support of the value of EI. George calls out these 5 strengths of a leader who has a good EI. They:

- can use EI as a signaling device for what needs attention.
- have a better feel for correct choices.
- are more creative.
- are stronger at integrative thinking.
- are better at Inductive reasoning. (p. 10)

The bottom line is based on the observed literature; there is a direct and positive correlation between EI and successful leadership.

What EI is With Respect to the Fight or Flight Response?

Understanding the basis for idea of Emotional intelligence is relatively easy. Inside your brain, near its base is the amygdala. “The amygdala is the part of the brain that regulates the fight, flight or freeze response (Nadler, P85).” It does this by storing your emotional memories. Each time a new event is encountered, the event is compared to similar events that it has memorized (Goleman, 2006, P. 76). Unfortunately, the amygdala is a bit jumpy. When it feels there is a threat, it can easily respond disrupt the processes in the neocortex, which is responsible for logical thought. Therefore, the brain’s logic processing shuts down and reactions favor more primal response to stressors. That is, in a person without emotional control, when an unexpected undesired event takes place, the neocortex is flooded with stress hormones (due to the amygdala) *before the neocortex has a chance to react logically*. Therefore the amygdala has pushed aside the brain’s ability to logically address an event. Dr. Goleman refers to this state as an “emotional hijack” courtesy of the amygdala (p. 261).

A Broader Look at EI

Beyond issuing a fight or flight response, the amygdala also controls other emotions and processes. Goleman identified 5 core traits that define emotionally intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy, and motivation (2006, p. 260). Dr. Savel & Dr. Munro, do a good job at defining these terms:

- *Self-awareness is simply the process of being aware of our emotional response to a situation.*

- *Self-regulation is the process by which we consciously turn an instinctive emotional response into some sort of lesser response or no response at all.*
- *Social skill conscious focused energy and efforts on managing relationships.*
- *Empathy is making a deliberate effort to take other people's emotions into account.*
- *Motivation is the ability to propel ourselves (and others) toward a specific goal (p. 104)*

With respect to the first four items above, they allow us to distance ourselves from our natural emotional responses just enough so we can function at a higher level (Savel & Munro, p. 106). Certainly, these four are important with respect to leading a team, particularly motivation, which is at the core of a project manager's and scrum master's job responsibilities.

To continue defining EI, Goleman identifies these skills as those owned by someone who has emotional competence: astute political awareness, the ability to make arguments with emotional impact, and high levels of interpersonal influence. He specifically notes that these skills make a person stand out in a crowd (2006, p. 259).

How to Control One's Own Emotions and Manage Other's Emotion

The good news is that team leaders can learn to alter their emotional state (George, p. 4). From personal experience as a Project Manager for over 15 years, the most important step first to improvement is to set a goal. As a Sr. Scrum Master/Agile Coach, I know the best way to articulate a goal is to state as:

As a < the role you are interested in >

I want < objective >

So that < the desired end state >

In this case, set a goal for your EI growth. The next important item is to understand where you are so you can plan where you want to be. The best way to do this is to send out a confidential 360 degree survey to your project team(s) or Scrum Team. I would like to underscore the importance of confidentiality; letting everyone responding to the survey know that their answers will not be relayed to a higher power keeps their amygdalae at peace. The idea is that people will be more forthright about your shortcomings when they know that only you will be. For this exercise, the most important survey points are those that are impacted by your mood, or the moods of stakeholders.

Changing Yourself

Self-awareness is the first step towards exhibiting strong EI (Goleman, 2006, P. 86). The next step is to look back over situations that got you upset, and remember what the commonality is between those situations. The idea is once you lose control, the amygdala will seize control of your neocortex. Rather than have that happen, you can train yourself to avoid an amygdala hijack, by consciously reacting to stimuli the way you want to (Goleman, 2006, p. 261).

Changing Other's Behavior

According to Salovey & Mayer, some tips for working with others in an EI context are first to not get sucked into someone else's emotional storm (pp. p197-198). Using emotional appeal is also an effective tool dealing with people in an emotional state. And, showing respect for the person who is in a tizzy can help avoid making matters worse (pp. p197-198).

Dr. Nadler did an excellent job sharing some more ideas about how to alter others' moods;

- Be mindful with respect to how your emotions are affecting others (p. 101)
- Be predictable so that your actions don't ruffle others' feathers (p. 94)
- Identify trigger events that set people on your teams off (p. 105)

For the last item, the triggers I look for are large or last minute change requests, defects that make it into production, and overly aggressive due dates. And, specifically for Scrum teams, a major stress generator is when a Product Owner tries to pack too much into an iteration.

As a team leader, the most basic way to tap into the positive emotions of a team is to be sure the team understands the vision of the organization, and maps the efforts of the team to the vision. I find that people that understand the value they are providing the organization. And, I also establish a climate of trust and collaboration; this leads people to feeling much safer. Feeling much more safe translates directly into keeping team member's Amygdala from taking over the neocortex.

One item at the core of leading using EI is to have empathy for team members. That is, listen carefully, and watch for signs of emotion. People who don't listen are viewed as uncaring (Goleman, 2006, pp. 141-142). When listening, be sure to ask pertinent questions and restate what they say to let them know you are listening as well as hearing (Goleman, 2006, pp. 142). Should you see signs of emotion, this can mean their amygdala is working on taking over their neocortex. Using soothing words that

evoke pleasant emotion can be a big asset in a situation like this; that is use words that the emotionally sensitive amygdala can understand.

Goleman also points out that personal integrity plays a part in this. Proving you are trustworthy though acting ethically (even when no one is watching). One can also do this thru; admitting mistakes, meeting commitments, and keep promises (2006, p. 89). The idea here is if your stakeholders feel you are trustworthy, it should help to keep the amygdala at bay because it has less reason to evoke a fear response.

Summary

EI is an important skill when leading project teams, either as a Project Manager or Scrum Master. The why, what and how with respect to EI has been shared in the hope of making you a more efficient team leader. This has worked for me, and I am optimistic that this knowledge will be helpful to you.

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Brian Vanderjack, PMP, MBA, CSM, SA is as an Agile Scrum Coach for AT&T, where he develops & delivers training and assists Agile Scrum teams. Related activities include:

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- Published several articles and published a book on Agile Scrum (publisher Business Expert Press).
- Regular speaker at IBM, AT&T and PMI on Agile Scrum and other topics.
- Earned Awards for Facilitator of the Year for the University of Phoenix, excellence in Project Management from AT&T, and as a Scrum Master for AT&T.
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