

Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence - Tapping into Your Team's Emotional Intelligence

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You're a smart leader. Your team is pretty smart, too. But do you all get bogged down because your "emotional intelligence" as a group leaves something to be desired? In this book excerpt from *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, authors **Daniel Goleman**, **Richard Boyatzis**, and **Annie McKee** explain how to lead with your emotions, not just your head.

by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee



Discovering the team's emotional intelligence

The CEO of a midsize company asked us to work with three members of an executive team who were not cooperating well together. The CEO thought the cure would be simply a matter of doing some team building to get things back on track. We decided to get more information. In our coaching conversations with team members, we looked for the emotional reality of the team and its norms, as well as themes concerning the leader's impact. We also took a snapshot of the team's emotional intelligence using the Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI), and we assessed management style and the executives' impact on the climate of the organization. [14](#) What we found surprised this CEO. True, the team wasn't working well together, but what it needed wasn't team building. The results of our interviews and the picture the 360-degree feedback painted about the team showed several underlying problems that required a very different kind of solution.

Not surprisingly, there were a few problems with specific team members. One team member, for example, measured very low on self-awareness. He was completely missing the clues people gave about his style of interaction. In meetings, he would express strong viewpoints and not understand how his aggressive manner was coming across to others. When people tried to get through to him about these issues, his body language said, "Lay off."

Another team member, recently arrived from a plant halfway across the world, exhibited little understanding of organizational politics in the corporate center and was alienating teammates and subordinates alike with his countercultural behavior. What made it even more difficult for his co-workers (and the man himself) to understand was that, on the interpersonal level at least, he displayed excellent empathy and relationship-building skills—he just couldn't read the team's emotional reality, and he was always out of synch.

Most of the time, these problems and other interpersonal issues become the focus of team building. When we looked deeper, however, we found that the real problem was a combination of ineffective norms and a negative emotional tone of the team. There was little self-awareness on the part of individuals or the team as a whole about their own group process: They did not manage individual team members' emotions or the group's moods very well, and they spent a lot of time and energy managing the team's negative emotions. In essence, it did not feel good to be part of the team, and people were avoiding working together.

Part of the underlying problem was that the team had established some ineffective norms in response to the CEO's pacesetter leadership style. The CEO's high drive for achievement and his inability to show empathy were creating a dysfunctionally competitive environment within the team. Moreover, while this leader thought his vision and strategy were apparent to everyone, our data showed us that wasn't the case at all: The reason the team members were moving in different directions was because they were unsure of where the larger organization was supposed to be headed.

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— Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee

Obviously, off-the-shelf team building would have done little to help this executive committee. By recognizing that its collective gap in emotional intelligence had created unproductive habits of interaction, the team could then see what it really needed to change. Equally important, the team recognized that in order for it to change as a group, each member also would have to commit to change as an individual. Armed with accurate information, we were able to target change processes for both the team and its individual members.

This team snapshot illustrates the importance of getting a clear picture of the emotional reality of an environment before launching into a solution. Part of understanding the emotional reality is uncovering the particular habits ingrained in a team or organization that can drive behavior. Often these habits make little sense to people—and yet they still act on them, seeing them as "just the way we do things around here." Emotionally intelligent leaders look for signs that reveal whether such habits, and the systems that support them, work well. By exploring and exposing unhealthy group habits, leaders can build more effective norms.

The previous example of the executive team unearthing its unproductive norms and unhealthy emotional reality points to a critical requirement for larger organizational change. Getting people in the top executive team together to have an honest conversation about what is working and what is not is a first critical step to creating a more resonant team. Such conversations bring to life the reality of what an organization feels like and what people are actually doing in it.

The problem is, these conversations are hot, and many leaders are afraid to start the dialogue—fearful of taking it to the primal dimension. Too often, unsure of their ability to handle emotions that arise when people talk honestly about what is going on, leaders stick to the safe topics: alignment, coordination of team members' functional areas, and strategy-implementation plans. While these safer conversations can set the stage for the next discussion—about the team itself, the organization, and the people—most teams stop the discussion at the level of strategy and functional alignment. They find it too difficult to be honest with one another, to examine the emotional reality and norms of the team. And this causes dissonance on the team—after all, everyone can feel when the norms are dysfunctional and the emotional climate is unproductive. By not taking on the problem, the leader actually magnifies it. It takes courage to break through that barrier, and it takes an emotionally intelligent leader to guide a team through it.

The benefits of such a process at the top are threefold. First, a new and healthy legitimacy develops around speaking the truth and honestly assessing both the behavioral and the emotional aspects of cultural leadership. Second, the very act of engaging in this process creates new habits: When people in the organization see their leaders searching for truth, daring to share a dream aloud, and engaging with one another in a healthy manner, they begin to emulate that behavior. And third, when truth seeking comes from the top, others are more willing to take the risk, too.

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Additional Resources: [Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations](#) Web site.

Setting Ground Rules: The Leader's Job

More than anyone else, it is the team leader who has the power to establish norms, maximizing harmony and collaboration to ensure that the team benefits from the best talents of each member. A leader accomplishes that by moving the group toward a higher emotional tone, using positive images, optimistic interpretations, and resonance-building norms and leadership styles, particularly visionary, democratic, affiliative, and coaching styles.

For example, leaders can model behavior through their own actions or by positively reinforcing members who do something that builds the group's emotional capacity. One might do this by conducting a short check-in session before meetings start, to ensure that people whose mood might be "off" can express their feelings and have them soothed. As Kenwyn Smith of the University of Pennsylvania and David Berg of Yale University noted in their research, such emotions in a group are crucial signals to a leader "that the issue or event at hand should be engaged rather than avoided"—short-circuiting the trouble rather than letting it smolder. ¹² For example, a leader might make a point of phoning a member whose behavior has been rude and discussing the issue, or she might

make sure she asks members who have been quiet what they think about a particular decision.

Setting the right ground rules requires an emotionally intelligent leader—again, common sense, but not common practice. The best leaders pay attention and act on their sense of what's going on in the group, and they needn't be obvious about it. Subtle messages, such as quietly reminding someone not to attack ideas during a brainstorming session, are powerful too. Under such leadership, teams over time naturally accumulate a common, positive lore about how to operate with each other.

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Footnotes

12. Paying attention to the undercurrents in the group: Kenwyn Smith and David Berg, *Paradoxes of Group Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

14. Team results using the Emotional Competence Inventory: Although the ECI is generally used as a 360-degree feedback instrument for individuals, we have found that when aggregated, individual scores on the competencies present a very interesting and useful picture of the team's overall strengths and weaknesses. We are currently researching this method of measuring a team's emotional competence; at this point, anecdotal evidence (i.e., the many conversations we have had with executives and their teams about their data) suggests that aggregate scores point to underlying team norms as well as team competencies.