

**SOFT SKILLS
THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTIVATING
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

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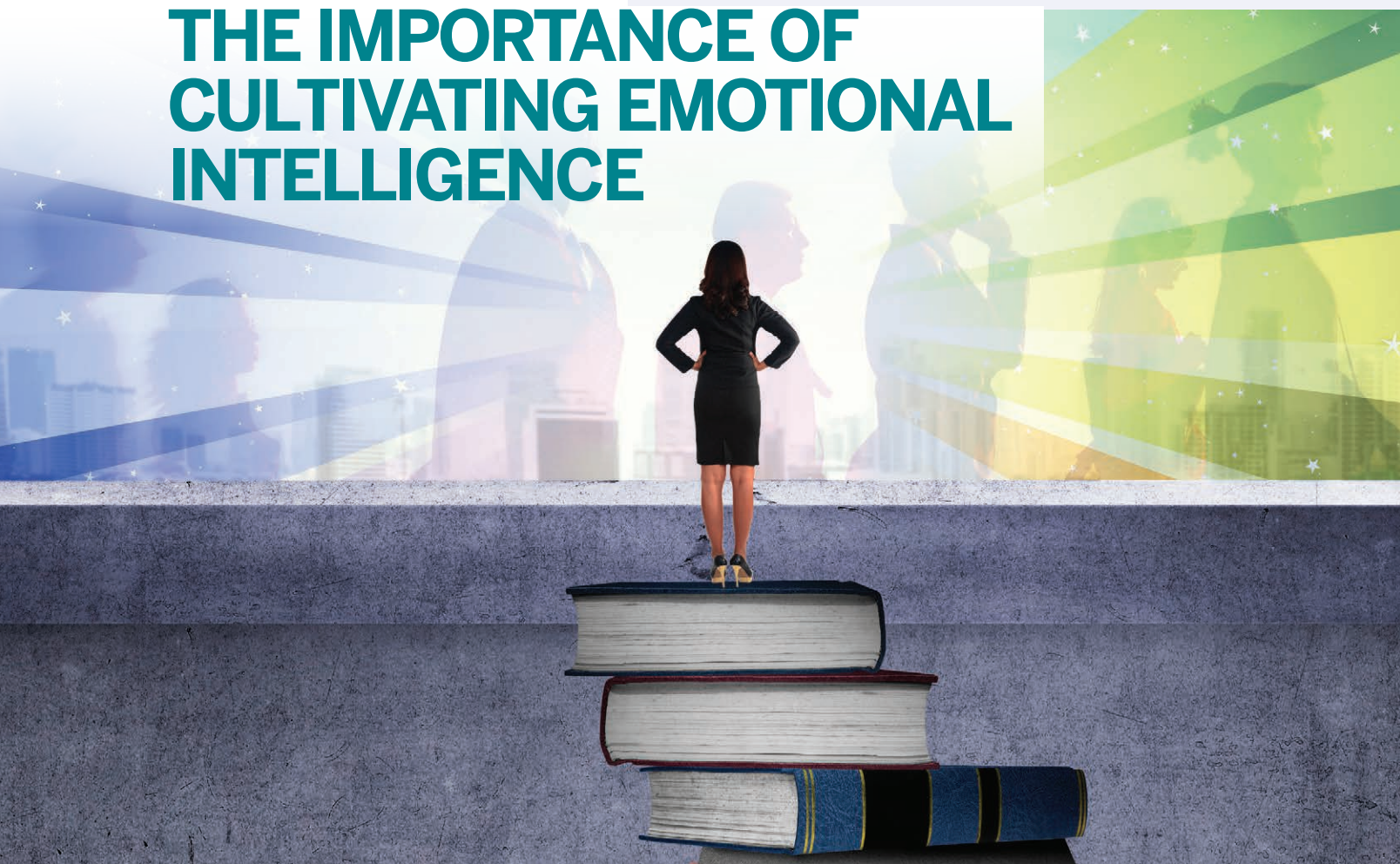
Ronald E. Wheeler
Boston University School of Law

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SOFT SKILLS

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTIVATING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Can “people skills” be taught? How emotional intelligence can help pave your way to success.

BY RONALD E. WHEELER

I have always really enjoyed human interaction. All of my life, I have known that my greatest joys and my most crushing disappointments came from my personal and professional human relationships. This reality is one that I have always embraced. For me, it means that I am one of those “people who need people” that Barbra Streisand sings about. These characteristics feel innate to me. I think of myself as a super-extrovert, and the fact that I grew up in a household full of super-introverts seems to underscore the immutability of extroversion. I feel lucky to have somehow inherited these innate people skills. However, the more I study and break down what we think of as “people skills” or “soft skills” into discrete parts, I discover that, although perhaps partly innate, these soft skills can be developed and improved with work, reflection, and practice.

I read somewhere that organizations hire people for their hard skills, but they end up firing people for their lack of soft skills. As a law library personnel manager, this statement resonates with me. So, what are these hard and soft skills? Hard skills are technical abilities, factual knowledge, specialized talents, and education. These are the things people learn in school or in technical job training. They are also aptitudes developed through work experience, study, or practice. Legal research skill is a good example of a hard skill. Soft skills are the skills that allow you to use your technical abilities and knowledge effectively in the workplace. They include personal, social, communication, and self-management behaviors. Attempts to define soft skills are all over the web, and they can vary widely. However, most would agree that soft skills include self-awareness, conscientiousness, adaptability, critical thinking, attitude, initiative, empathy, self-control, organizational awareness, leadership, time management, political savvy, likability, and persuasive ability. To sum it all up, a person who has a mastery of soft skills can be defined as being emotionally intelligent.

The best definition of emotional intelligence that I have found is from Jack G. Montgomery of Western Kentucky University. He says that emotional intelligence is the ability to sense, understand, and effectively apply the power and acumen of emotions as a source of human energy, information, and influence.

I love this definition because it acknowledges the very important, appropriate, and positive role that emotions can play. All of my life I have been called emotional, hypersensitive, or tenderhearted in ways that implied weakness or negativity. I firmly believe the more we are in touch with our emotions, the more we understand their origins, the more we sense these emotions in others, and the more we can appropriately express our emotions (even in the workplace), the better

I firmly believe the more we are in touch with our emotions ... the more we sense these emotions in others ... and the more we can appropriately express our emotions ... the better we are as employees.

we are as employees. Psychologist Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, breaks down emotional intelligence skills into five basic parts: self-awareness, self-management, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills. Assessing yourself in each of these areas requires honesty and forgiveness as the journey is both humbling and enlightening. Below I share some frank self-assessments that led me to my breakthrough moments.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is one of the most important and fundamental components of emotional intelligence. Being self-aware means knowing what you are feeling and why, it means knowing what you are good at and what you are not good at, it means knowing what others think about you, and it means really knowing who you are. Self-awareness is essential because when you know yourself and your feelings, you are

better equipped to correctly interpret (and avoid misinterpreting) your surroundings and your coworkers. It helps you avoid the petty misunderstandings based on misperceptions that plague many workplaces. Self-awareness allows you to form appropriate and helpful verbal and non-verbal responses to people or situations.

Acquiring a level of self-awareness about my own insecurities and biases has helped me to become a better employee, a better manager, and a better person. Embarrassingly, because of my own personal history, I have discovered that I often have a visceral negative reaction to large, tall, white men. This negative reaction is even more intense if these men are older and somewhat boisterous. This reaction can cause me to form negative opinions, act less friendly, not engage in conversation, and ultimately impede productive relationships. As I began thinking more about these interactions, I developed the capacity to recognize when I am having these negative feelings and to examine them in real time.

I recall vividly the first time I paused during an interaction with a tall, white man to examine my negative feelings. I recall thinking to myself: (1) this guy is being perfectly nice and friendly to me, (2) these negative feelings have no rational basis, (3) this must be my own unconscious bias at work, and (4) I will not be ruled by bias. I was able to take charge of my actions and not let them be dictated by negative feelings that have no basis in my conscious reality. I was able to interact in more friendly and appropriate ways with a whole set of perfectly wonderful people with whom

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interactions had initially been difficult. Moreover, I was able to make my professional circle more expansive, rich and diverse. In this way, being self-aware has helped me to understand my own internal and external likes, dislikes, insecurities, hypersensitivities, and vulnerabilities. It has also helped me to recognize that almost everyone has these kinds of vulnerabilities to overcome and that they can be conquered.

So how does one become more self-aware? One strategy is to use “I think” statements in your own internal dialogue. This will allow you to notice patterns or scripts that recur. These patterns will help you to understand your own emotions and how they can be situationally triggered. It also allows you to ask yourself, “Is this really what I think?” So, for me, in my big, white guy example, I began having the following internal conversation with myself:

- I think he has no respect for me.
- I think he assumes I’m stupid.
- I think he wishes he didn’t have to interact with me.

After having this same internal conversation several times, I had to realize that I had no reality-based reason to think any of those things and that these white men were perfectly nice, kind, and professional. I had to admit to myself that I was the source of the problem and that I had to work on my own internal issues in order to function appropriately in the workplace and elsewhere.

Self-Management

Self-management is defined as the awareness and management of how one tends to encounter the world. It entails controlling how you internally and externally respond to people or situations both verbally and nonverbally. Good self-management is not possible without self-awareness, and it allows you to be emotionally honest with yourself, with your coworkers, and others. I feel that emotional honesty is extremely important in the workplace, but I acknowledge that some people



would disagree. Some managers feel that emotions should not be expressed at all in the workplace, and I strongly disagree with this assertion.

I know that I struggle with anger. I struggle with how to feel it, how to process it, and how to express it. I never really know when, how, and to whom I should let it out. I often don’t even recognize the feeling of anger until very late in a situation when I say to myself, “Oh, wait? This is anger I’m feeling. I get it!”

Having grown up in a household with three super-introverts, there was never any arguing, yelling, or demonstration of how to best communicate anger. So, I think I failed to learn how and when to express it. The result is that I struggle with anger as a manager. My default or go-to responses to anger in my personal life are to raise my voice or to burst into tears, and neither of these is usually appropriate in the workplace. However, working on self-awareness and self-management has made me better equipped to recognize anger in myself, to analyze its origins, assess its validity, and fashion appropriate ways to acknowledge and express it honestly.

Years ago, I was having a difficult conversation with an employee of mine in my office. This employee began saying things to me about my behavior as a manager that seemed to me to be accusatory. Some of her comments began sounding like veiled threats. These comments certainly evinced a lack of respect, and they felt intentionally hurtful. I wanted to yell, “What the (EXPLETIVE) are you talking about?” But instead, as a

means of self-management, I began an internal conversation with myself, which sounded something like this: “OK, I am getting really angry and upset, and these emotions are scaring me. I need to calm down! I need to communicate to her that the things she is saying are upsetting and are unproductive. I need to be calm but emotionally honest.” This internal conversation allowed me to acknowledge my emotions, give myself instructions on my behavior, and plan my response.

So, I said to her, “The things you’ve just said are quite upsetting to me.” My voice shook as I spoke those words, and I paused to take a calming breath and to look her in the eyes. I could see her begin to recognize that she had made me angry. I then asked, “Why did you say those things to me? What purpose did you want to achieve in this meeting? How were you hoping I would respond? Why, exactly, are you here in my office?”

Posing these questions served many purposes. First, they were sincere questions that I had. I was trying to understand this interaction. Next, they caused her to think and to examine her own motives and intentions. I believe they caused her to realize that her behavior was counterproductive and was not going to achieve any of her desired goals. After a pause, she got up and left my office.

When I think about this incident, it teaches me that being emotionally honest, by communicating that I was becoming upset, was powerful. Also, asking her about her motives, instead of inferring malice, was important to try to get to the heart of the matter. I believe

her hasty exit was the result of her realizing that the situation had gone awry.

Self-management, informed by self-awareness, gave me the tools to take charge of this difficult situation.

Self-Motivation

Jack Montgomery defines self-motivation as expending energy in a specific direction for a specific purpose. It requires you to realize what tasks require extra energy and why that is. You should also be able to identify what the costs are of expending this energy and on whom these costs will be imposed. Additionally, if you are not able to self-motivate, you should recognize why not, what are the costs to you personally, what are the costs to others, and what (if any) are the remedies?

In my own professional life, I procrastinate until the last minute on most projects. I realize shortly before projects are due that I must now self-motivate and expend a ton of extra energy, work longer hours, forego happy hour, and endure unnecessary stress to get the project done on time. I know what it requires, and I know why. The cost to me is stress and aggravation. However, if I were not able to self-motivate, I would have to ask why not? I might have to ponder things like: (1) I hate my job, (2) I don't care about this project, or (3) I really want to be a personal shopper. The cost to me might be bad self-esteem, disappointing my peers, and poor evaluations. The cost to others might be lost profits, low team morale, or that co-workers no longer want to work with me. The remedy could be changing jobs, seeing a therapist, getting medication, exercising more, or planning and scheduling work projects more in advance.

Empathy

Simply put, empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. People lacking empathy are often called self-centered, narcissistic, or even sociopathic. Empathy helps you to be a good team player because it allows you to better understand the effects that your actions have on others. It helps you to see things through

the eyes of others and to anticipate the wants and needs of others in the workplace. It allows you to be a more compassionate and kinder human being. Moreover, it helps you to avoid misunderstanding others' intentions.

Professor Nancy E. Snow writes in her *American Philosophical Quarterly* article titled "Empathy" that "empathic identification is not always fully conscious or deliberate. Empathy is produced through a variety of psycho-physical mechanisms, some of which operate at fairly deep levels of consciousness." Empathy serves as a sort of emotional compass for our actions. Snow posits that an empathizer is guided to consciously look for signs of other peoples' emotional states, to reflect on the appropriateness of his or her response, and to deliberate on what kind of action is appropriate in the circumstances.

However, too much empathy can be counterproductive because it can allow other people to manipulate you. For example, empathy has become counterproductive when a supervisor decides not to draft a disciplinary memo about an underperforming employee because doing so would hurt that employee's feelings. Empathy has also become a problem when rather than tell a co-worker that she is not carrying her weight, you decide instead to do some of her work yourself to avoid upsetting her. These are examples of too much empathy.

Social Skills

The final component of emotional intelligence is social skills. Social skills are a catch-all category that combines effective communication, situationally appropriate assertiveness, listening ability, the ability to take and receive constructive criticism, the ability to work successfully in a team situation, and being emotionally honest and expressing emotions appropriately. Socially skilled individuals are able to combine all of the above-mentioned facets of emotional intelligence in ways that enable them to be excellent employees. These are the employees who, in addition to possessing hard

skills, have the something extra that makes them not only insightful and productive but popular and sought after as colleagues or teammates.

Other psychologists, like Rachel Brushfield in 2012, have identified several behavioral indicators that can be used to measure and observe emotional intelligence. These indicators include self-confidence, a self-deprecating sense of humor, trustworthiness, openness to change, a strong drive to achieve, optimism, cross-cultural sensitivity, effectiveness in leading change, persuasiveness, empathy, remaining unflustered when challenged, and awareness of one's own emotional state. Indeed, taken as a whole, these qualities that measure emotional intelligence have been seen as predictors of success.

Conclusion

Although technical knowledge, education, and other achievement indicators or hard skills may get you the job, often it is the soft skills that enable you to advance, get promoted, and have a successful career. As one young lawyer put it in a recent Huron Consulting white paper, "I wasn't the smartest student in law school ... but I have always understood what makes people tick and always known my own strengths and weaknesses. I'm not afraid to ask questions and not afraid to look dumb. Too many brighter lawyers don't know how to get on with people." Knowing what these skills and traits are allows one to focus on them and develop greater emotional intelligence. These are the skills that could pave the way for your ultimate success. ■



RONALD E. WHEELER
DIRECTOR OF THE FINEMAN AND PAPPAS LAW LIBRARIES

Associate Professor of
Law and Legal Research
Boston University School of Law
Boston, MA
wheleerr@bu.edu

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