

What People (Still) Get Wrong About Emotional Intelligence

by Daniel Goleman

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Summary. Many people assume that having emotional intelligence means being “nice.” But this perception obscures some fundamental benefits to developing one’s EI. For example, simply saying someone is nice can belie the fact that they’re only nice to some people and not... [more](#)

In the 25 years since my book *Emotional Intelligence* was published, one of the most persistent things I see people get wrong about the concept is that it equates to being “nice.” But it doesn’t, and misunderstanding this can get people into trouble.

The first thing that often comes to mind when someone says a colleague is “nice” is that they’re pleasant to work with. But this attitude can obscure more subtle challenges. Take, for example, the question of who the person is nice *to*. I think of a manager I knew who was charming, polite, and very willing to please — to clients and to her boss. She was undeniably nice to them. But when I spoke to people who had worked for her, I found that she created a toxic workspace for her direct reports. She was hyper-critical, aloof, and abrasive. *All* of these relationships matter when developing your emotional intelligence.

On the flip side, especially in some competitive business contexts, I also see niceness interpreted as someone who tries to avoid confrontations and is thus easily manipulable. Why would you want to work on your emotional intelligence if it just means that you’re going to be walked all over? Or, if you’re responsible for designing development for your people, why would you want to create a company of “nice” people — don’t you want to create a company of people who are “strong”?

In fact, being skilled in each of the four components of emotional intelligence would allow you to have confrontations when you need to, and to do it more strategically and productively. As I’ve written about elsewhere, those components are: *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, and *relationship management*. (You’ll notice that none of these is aligned with “niceness.”)

How do these concepts apply to handling a confrontation? If you’re worried about being walked all over, you might be prone to err too much in the other direction, venting your anger at the person and exacerbating the situation. If you are truly conflict-averse, you might avoid the confrontation altogether. Emotional intelligence provides a middle way between these extremes. Strong *self-awareness* and *self-management* would let you control your initial impulses or any anxiety you might have around the conversation. A highly developed sense of empathy — that’s part

of *social awareness* — would allow you see the situation from the other person’s point of view, so you could present your argument to them in a way that makes them feel heard, or that speaks to their own interests. And handling conflict is an important part of *relationship management*. You’d say what you have to say, clearly and strongly, and in a way the other person can hear.

Take, for example, the founder-CEO of a company I know. He has always avoided conflict; this became a particular problem for his company because he shied away from ever telling his employees that they needed to work harder. It got so bad that he had other employees calling him telling him that their colleagues were slacking off so much that it they couldn’t do their own jobs. So the CEO began working with a coach who helped him speak to the laggards, telling them clearly what he expected of them — without threats or blame, but also without passivity. And to his surprise, the conversations went smoothly and the former slack-offs started pulling their own weight. Since then he’s becoming much more assertive about confronting his shirking employees.

This is a common story — I’ve seen many people develop their ability to manage confrontations strategically in this way. This is emotional intelligence at its best, and I don’t want people to miss out on its benefits because they dismiss it as passivity.

However, it is also possible for people who display certain kinds of emotional intelligence to be *overly* strategic in their approach. (This disadvantage gets obscured if you think of EI as just being “nice.”) That’s because having strong EI means that to some degree you have the ability to manage the emotions of those around you as well as your own. This can quickly become problematic.

Take empathy. There are three different kinds of empathy that reside in different parts of the brain:

- Cognitive: I know how you think.

- Emotional: I know how you feel.
- Empathetic concern: I care about you.

Let's say you're really good at the first two of these but not the third. Alone they can easily be used to manipulate people. We see this in many overachieving bosses in command-and-control cultures: they tend to be pacesetters who get promoted because they have very high personal standards of excellence. They are great at pushing people to meet short-term targets — they communicate well because of their cognitive empathy and know their words will carry weight with their employees because of their emotional empathy — but because of their lack of empathetic concern they don't care what the cost is to the person. In addition to being morally wrong, that creates emotional exhaustion and burns people out.

One CFO at a healthcare system, for example, was fixated on the organization's bottom line. He used what he knew about the top management team to convince them to ratchet up the number of patients each physician had to see in a given period to increase profits. He didn't care about the emotional cost and physical toll this took on his physicians. Eventually an executive coach, however, pointed out how badly he needed to boost his empathic concern, citing concerning signs of depression and anxiety among the medical staff as well as the high turnover rate. It turned out that the CFO was already adept at displaying empathetic concern for family and friends, but he had not demonstrated it at work. Under the coach's guidance, he was able to adapt this skill for a high-intensity workplace. He started listening to the complaints of his medical staff and collaborated with them to identify a more humane level of demand.

Leaders who develop their emotional intelligence more deliberately will be more attuned not only to all aspects of empathy, but to all four components of emotional intelligence, in all the relationships they encounter. Believing that emotional

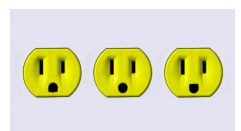
intelligence simply means being “nice” obscures what makes this framework so useful — and prevents leaders from having powerful, productive conversations that build up their ability to influence and lead in all their relationships.

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Daniel Goleman, best known for his writing on emotional intelligence, is codirector of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University. His latest book is *Building Blocks of Emotional Intelligence*, a 12-primer set on each of the emotional intelligence competencies, and he offers training on the competencies through an online learning platform, Emotional Intelligence Training Programs. His other books include *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* and *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*.

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