



The EQ Difference

Having supervisors and other leaders in law firms with high levels of emotional intelligence contributes directly to talent retention and a positive workplace environment.

BY GRETCHEN NEELS

Remember Mr. Spock from the series *Star Trek* – the half-Vulcan, half-human character who was plenty book smart, but when it came to relating to others, he was clueless? We don't have to venture too far from the Starship to find people who, like Spock, are great at what they do technically, but don't have the skills to establish and nurture professional relationships – the cornerstone of all profitable service businesses.

Spock, of course, did such a bang-up job keeping the bad guys at bay with his encyclopedic brain and Vulcan death grip, no one was all that concerned about his "soft" skill set. Turns out, there was enough charm and magnetism in one Captain James T. Kirk to manage the relationships needed to navigate the galaxy. Imagine how effective the *Enterprise* would have been had Spock been more socially adept, working in tandem with Kirk in going where no man had gone before.



Emotional intelligence isn't some new-age, touchy-feely concept *du jour*. Grounded in psychology and neuroscience, a preponderance of evidence suggests that technical brilliance alone does not guarantee a successful career.

The concept of emotional intelligence (EQ), sometimes called social intelligence, which has been around for quite some time in corporate America, is just gaining traction in the legal world – and it's about time. At its core, emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions, as well as see and care about the impact one's actions and behaviors have on others.

In his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman cited a study of what corporations reportedly looked for in newly graduated MBA candidates: communication skills, interpersonal skills, and initiative.* He wrote, "We live in a time when our prospects for the future increasingly depend on managing ourselves and handling our relationships more artfully."

As the legal landscape continues to shift, these attributes will be even more important. We've all worked with the highly educated or technically proficient person who is clueless about his abrasive manner, poor listening skills, and complete lack of empathy. While he may be the king of compliance, the baron of budgets, or the lord of library science, his co-workers tiptoe past him like he is a sleeping pit bull, while his subordinates tolerate his barks and bites for only so long, jumping the fence at the first opportunity. Because people leave managers and not firms, having supervisors and other leaders with high levels of EQ contributes directly to retention and a positive workplace environment.

Mark Stull, Director of Administration at Winston & Strawn, LLP, has been described as having a good deal of emotional competence,

so much so he's had people hug him after he's dismissed them for poor performance.

"Any good manager cares about their people," he said. "I guess my empathy and caring come through even during difficult conversations, such as letting someone go."

Emotional intelligence isn't some new-age, touchy-feely concept *du jour*. Grounded in psychology and neuroscience, a preponderance of evidence suggests that technical brilliance alone does not guarantee a successful career. It is also clear that people with low levels of EQ are able to improve their emotional competencies with training and coaching.

Consider these key EQ-related questions as they related to your firm and its leadership:

Q: How do you begin improving EQ levels?

A: Typically, with a 360-degree assessment. Unlike a traditional performance appraisal, during which one receives input from the top down, or an "upward appraisal," during which direct reports weigh in on a superior's performance, a good 360 assessment takes a full picture by seeking feedback from subordinates, peers, and upper management. Once a person's performance ratings are charted, he or she knows which areas need attention.

Q: Is the feedback anonymous?

Yes, completely. And the person undergoing the assessment often chooses which staff members are asked to participate. It's also useful to include people from outside the firm, such as clients and vendors. Every now and then, a spouse may also be tapped on the shoulder to contribute.

*Karen O. Dowd and Jeanne Liedtka, "What Corporations Seek in MBA Hires: A Survey," *The Magazine of the Graduate Management Admission Council*, Winter 1994.

Q: What's the next step?

In conjunction with the individual 360 assessments, provide a training session outlining the basics of EQ and why it's important to law firm leaders. After the coursework, attendees get to see the results of their assessments and discuss them with a neutral party.

Q: Then what?

Depending on individual needs, more specific training can ensue, or individual coaching might be a better option. If, for example, many of the leaders at your firm find they rated low on listening skills, a course on Active Listening might be a good idea. However, if a person registered consistently low in areas such as empathy and self-control, private, one-on-one coaching would probably be more effective.

Often we're guilty of hearing and seeing only what we want to, with little awareness or concern about how we're truly being perceived. It's pretty gutsy to put oneself out there and take the good with the bad from those within our professional circles. But it's exactly the way to show others that you are human, unlike Mr. Spock, and willing to learn and change. What better example could one possibly set for his or her firm? ✨

about the author

Gretchen Neels is President of Neels & Company, which provides strategic business communication training to law firms and other professional services organizations. She was recently certified to teach "Emotional Intelligence – A Different Kind of Smart™" by the Adele Lynn Leadership Group. Contact Neels at gneels@neelscompany.com.

LEARN MORE

Want to learn more about emotional intelligence and its importance to law firm leadership? ALA members can find many articles on the subject through the Legal Management Resource Center at thesource.alanet.org. Simply type the keywords "emotional intelligence" to pull up the list of articles and other relevant resources.

SIX KEYS TO STRONG EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Self-awareness, self-control and empathy form the foundation of strong emotional intelligence, followed by social expertness, personal influence and mastery of vision.

- **Self-awareness.** Knowing what influences our feelings, positively or negatively, is critical. It's very important to realize what kinds of situations can put us over the edge before we get there.
- **Self-control.** Once we know our "triggers," we can implement coping mechanisms. For instance, just knowing that getting cut off on the highway produces intense feelings of rage (self-awareness), we can decide to cope better while driving by listening to soothing music or a recorded book (self-control).
- **Empathy.** We must cultivate the ability to look at a situation from another's perspective. In our driving example, consider that the driver who cut you off might have been someone helping an expectant mother get to the hospital.
- **Social expertness.** The ability to build relationships requires empathy, excellent communication skills, and the ability to listen well.
- **Personal influence.** All leaders are, by definition, required to influence and persuade others to follow them. This is impossible to do without the qualities listed above.
- **Mastery of vision.** A mission statement of sorts outlines intentions and values.