

How can executives increase their emotional intelligence in the workplace?



WRITTEN BY



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BRIEFLY SPEAKING

Unlike IQ, emotional intelligence in the workplace can be changed with the right effort. Taking that journey requires commitment and is made easier with the help of others. Here's how.

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How can executives increase their emotional intelligence in the workplace?

Having strong emotional intelligence in the workplace is the single greatest differentiator for successful executives. Let me say that again, **having strong emotional intelligence is the single greatest differentiator for successful executives.**

In *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman cites a study of hundreds of executives at 15 global firms. The result? Close to 90 percent of the leadership success of the star performers was attributable to emotional intelligence.

With that kind of result you might expect executives to be intensely focused on developing their own skills in this area. Sometimes this is the case but our everyday experience in the workplace makes it clear it is not the norm. And this points to the first part of the answer to the question of how executives can increase their emotional intelligence in the workplace – develop sufficient **motivation**.

Without a strong desire for change, nothing will happen. No amount of argument, shaming, or telling can overcome a lack of energy for change. This is a formidable hurdle since improving emotional intelligence in the workplace is a sustained effort that requires real work. To overcome this hurdle, it can be helpful to consider the following formula for change:

$$\text{Discomfort X Vision} = \text{Energy for Change}$$

When an executive is absolutely clear on both the pitfalls of their current state and a vision of how their life will improve, desire can take over. So step one is to get fully grounded in all the ways the current state is holding them back or causing harm to themselves, those around them, and the organization and customers they serve. Most organizations have plenty of ways to supply this data – 360's, performance reviews, and mentors to name a few. Supplementing this with feedback from trusted advisors or colleagues can add a powerful wallop.

The flip side of this is developing a clear vision of how life will be when the executive is able to navigate his or her own emotional terrain – and that of others – more successfully. “*What will be different? How will that feel? What new possibilities will be available?*” are all examples of questions that can only be answered by the executive. Visualizing and sensing that future state helps build the pull that, married with the push of discomfort, generates the sustained effort to do the real work of change.

With motivation now in place, it's time to start the journey. Like any journey, a map can be incredibly useful. Quantifiable **knowledge** of where we are and

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where we want to be is essential. This is the role of assessments. There may already be some elements of this available from the feedback but an assessment offers the advantage of a framework and clearer distinctions of what changes might be most helpful.

I am going to avoid the temptation to promote the advantages of my favorite tool and simply point out that there are choices. Each offers its own list of unique benefits. While the choice of assessment can alter the shape of the work ahead, any reputable assessment provides benefits. Make it part of the development plan.

Just these two steps will significantly move one along the path to change. We now know what we didn't know before. This new awareness generates its own motivation as it can create greater confidence that the task can be accomplished. However, a wise sage once said that the distance from not knowing to knowing is shorter than the distance from knowing to doing. And we are now shifting to the "doing" part of the journey.

Few of us instinctively know how to work with emotions – if we did, we wouldn't be looking to change, right? So engaging a coach or other guide who is familiar with this terrain is important. A good coach or counselor will be able to articulate the role of emotions and a process that allows us to respond appropriately to the emotions we sense. That process includes being aware of emotions and what they are telling us.

A good coach or counselor will work one-on-one with the executive to create **practices** focused on specific capabilities and goals. He or she also supports the executive in the many challenges that can lie ahead: overcoming resistance to personal change, finding safe opportunities to test new ways of being, creating accountability for and learning from the practice of new skills and behaviors as well as creating a long-term plan to sustain successful change.

Like any change, increasing our emotional intelligence in the workplace benefits from regular **feedback and feedforward** from stakeholders. Success will be more likely if peers, direct reports, and supervisors can be enrolled in the process. This is an important element and skipping over it should be avoided if at all possible. Helpful data becomes available and it is more likely that successful change will be noted and appreciated. And nothing helps foster success like getting credit for progress made.

(Additional information may be found in my article, "What is the definition of emotional intelligence and why should senior executives work on it?")

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