Emotional Intelligence

Implications for All United States Air Force Leaders

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Editorial Abstract: Emotional intelligence and its five domains of empathy, handling relationships, self-awareness, managing emotions, and motivating oneself constitute a set of learned, interpersonal abilities that allow leaders to become highly effective. The authors outline the characteristics of emotional intelligence and offer practical ways for readers to integrate its techniques into their leadership style.

Knowing others and knowing oneself, in one hundred battles no danger. Not knowing the other and knowing oneself, one victory for one loss. Not knowing the other and not knowing oneself, in every battle certain defeat.

- Sun Tzu, The Art of War

This article explores the emerging field of emotional intelligence (EI). It discusses what it is, why it matters in general terms, how individuals can improve their EI, and what impact it has on the effectiveness of US Air Force leaders. Specifically, EI is powerful because it overrides logic in the brain due to the way people are wired. Unlike natural intelligence, usually labeled IQ, EI can be developed. Studies have shown that highly productive team leaders have high EI. That is why Air Force leaders at all levels should know about this emerging field. As will become apparent, Sun Tzu's concise observations about the awareness of both self and others anticipated the results that emerged from twentieth-century EI studies. He asserted that a person with self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the opponent will win. EI studies offer a more sophisticated, more practical approach to developing this essential awareness of self and others. More specifically, almost all highly effective leaders have EI- lesser leaders do not.

What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Scientists began tracing the outlines of EI in the 1920s. By 1990 J. D. Mayer and P. Salovey had identified five EI domains under two overarching relational areas:

Interpersonal

* Empathy involves the degree that individuals are sensitive to others’ feelings and concerns. Empathetic leaders are sensitive to the differences in how people feel about things. Such leaders are able to step outside themselves to evaluate situations from another perspective.

* Handling Relationships describes how effectively leaders detect and manage the organization’s
emotional environment. This requires developing a wide-ranging competence for sensing subtle shifts in the social atmosphere.

Intrapersonal

- **Self-Awareness** involves purposeful monitoring of one’s emotional reactions to identify feelings as they emerge.

- **Managing Emotions** builds on the understanding of emotional origins derived from self-awareness to manage feelings appropriately as they arise.

- **Motivating Oneself** requires individuals to channel emotions effectively. Examples could include stifling impulses and delaying gratifications.¹

When one considers EI in light of these domains, it becomes obvious that the field represents a set of comprehensive, interpersonal abilities rather than hardwired native skills; as such, it can be learned. EI could well be called “affective effectiveness.” The affective domain consists of mind, will, and emotions (“heart knowledge”); it contrasts with linguistic, logical, mathematical, and spatial intelligences—the cognitive domain of “head” knowledge. When military leaders unfamiliar with EI first hear about it, they are generally unreceptive. But there is more to judging this “book” than its “touchy-feely-sounding” cover.

Currently, Dr. Daniel Goleman is the leading author and researcher in EI studies. He begins his first book, Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than I.Q., with a discussion of the brain-mapping work of neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux of the New York University Center for Neural Sciences:

> His findings on the circuitry of the emotional brain overthrow a long-standing notion about the limbic system, putting the amygdala at the center of the action. . . . Sensory signals from the eye or ear travel first to the thalamus, and then across a single synapse— to the amygdala; a second signal from the thalamus is routed to the neocortex— the thinking brain. This branching allows the amygdala to begin to respond before the neocortex, which mulls information through several levels of brain circuits before it fully perceives and finally initiates its more finely tailored response. . . . This circuit does much to explain the power of emotion to overwhelm rationality (emphasis in original).²

This mapping discovery carries powerful implications. According to Goleman and others, the human reactions stored in the amygdala can be altered. With repeated practice, a normally “short tempered” individual can learn to manage and even relearn those initial reactions to frustration or discomfort. More importantly, over time, the stored information for individuals engaged in antisocial, self-defeating behavior can be changed. Until now, our cultural bias has called for focusing training and measurement efforts only on cognitive abilities, but interesting new data demonstrate that EI can be developed.

**Implications for Leader Development**

As leaders intuitively appreciate, the better they know/understand and manage themselves and the better they know/understand and manage others, the more likely they are to get the results they want. And that is EI’s value to military leaders. In an interview conducted in 1996, Dr. Howard Gardner cited linguistic and personal intelligence as the sine qua non of leadership: “It doesn’t mean that all leaders have to start with having well developed variants of both of them, but if they’re not a particularly good speaker [sic] or they don’t have a particularly good understanding of other people, that’s got to be a top priority for them.”³
A 1997 American Management Association study discovered a significant mismatch between employer expectations and the skills of newly graduated professionals, who lacked the ability to speak and relate to others effectively and to work as team players. Additionally, the University of Virginia’s Business School interviewed corporate recruiters, who told them the top skills they sought were interpersonal: the ability to adapt to the feelings and concerns of others, to motivate others, and to deal effectively with conflict and adversity.¹

Data gathered by Dr. Goleman show that EI is a reliable predictor of higher-division effectiveness:

Emotional intelligence played an increasingly important role at the highest levels of the company, where differences in technical skills are of negligible importance. In other words, the higher the rank of a person considered to be a star performer, the more emotional intelligence capabilities showed up as the reason for his or her effectiveness. When I compared star performers with average ones in senior leadership positions, nearly 90% of the difference in their profiles was attributable to emotional intelligence factors rather than cognitive abilities. Other researchers have confirmed that emotional intelligence not only distinguishes outstanding leaders but can also be linked to strong performance.²

Arguably, these same desired skills are at the heart of leadership generally and Air Force leadership specifically. These are not manage-ment skills- they are fundamental to the capacity to lead airmen.

For Goleman and his colleagues, versatility is the key to EI. As individuals develop strong EI competencies, they gain flexible ranges of leader-style options and, ultimately, leader effectiveness. Because EI involves problem solving and managing the uncertain, Goleman’s approach is anything but wine and roses. Instead, he focuses on leadership’s bottom line: results. His work with the Hay/McBer consulting firm, which collected observations from a sample of 3,871 executives selected from a database of over 20,000 such people worldwide, led to some groundbreaking leadership applications for EI. Executives who lacked EI were rarely rated as outstanding in their annual performance reviews, and their divisions underperformed by an average of almost 20 percent.³ Goleman’s study identified six distinct and effective leader styles, all derived from different EI competencies. Like the arbitrary lie of a golf ball, the situations or environments in which executives find themselves appear to dictate the mix of EI competencies and, eventually, the appropriate leadership style that a leader would invoke:

- **Visionary**: Occurs when change requires a new vision or clear direction
  - EI competencies: self-confidence, empathy, catalyst for change
- **Coaching**: Helps employees improve performance by building long-term capabilities
  - EI competencies: developing others, empathy, self-awareness
- **Affiliative**: Helps heal team rifts, motivates during stressful times
  - EI competencies: empathy, building relationships, communication
- **Democratic**: Builds consensus, solicits employee inputs
  - EI competencies: collaboration, team leadership, communication
- **Pacesetting**: Elicits high-quality results from motivated team
EI competencies: conscientiousness, achievement, initiative

- Commanding: Provides a kick-start turnaround in a crisis, deals with problem employees

   - EI competencies: achievement, initiative, self-control.⁷

Unlike traditional approaches to leader development, wherein people label their style based upon how they perceive their own strengths and preferences, Goleman’s approach expands the horizon:

The most effective leaders switch flexibly among the leadership styles as needed. Although that may sound daunting, we witnessed it more often than you might guess, at both large corporations and tiny start-ups, by seasoned veterans who could explain exactly how and why they lead and by entrepreneurs who claim to lead by gut alone. . . . Such leaders don’t mechanically match their style to fit a checklist of situations- they are far more fluid. They are exquisitely sensitive to the impact they are having on others and seamlessly adjust their style to get the best results.⁸

One of Goleman’s greatest contributions to leadership studies is the aforementioned notion of sets of competencies grouped into specific styles. He indicates the competency mix needed in specific situations and even ventures to predict how a particular style mix will affect group cohesiveness. Because he focuses on leadership’s bottom line, he doesn’t back away from either the style or the appearance of stress or conflict in the leadership scenario. On the contrary, he remains acutely aware that some approaches, although necessary for the problems at hand, will have human consequences (e.g., a backlash) and should be monitored for longer-term challenges. Using Goleman’s bottom-line focus may lead to an appropriate EI behavioral-leadership mix but offers no guarantee that all individuals in the organization will emerge from the scenario feeling happy or satisfied. If they wish to realize the maximum benefits from EI, leaders who incorporate EI into their leadership portfolio must combine the short-term focus required for completing the immediate task with a long-term emphasis on the organization’s emotional health. In other words, commanders and supervisors develop EI awareness by maximizing their inherent capabilities and developing the flexibility to trade in and out of the style needed in a given leadership situation.

Development Efforts: Emotional Intelligence Can Be Learned

In his article “What Makes a Leader?” Dr. Goleman answers the question “Can EI be learned?” with a resounding “yes” and expands upon the basic mechanisms required to enhance EI:

Emotional Intelligence is born largely in the neurotransmitters of the brain’s limbic system, which governs feelings, impulses, and drives. Research indicates the limbic system learns best through motivation, extended practice, and feedback. . . . The neocortex [which governs analytical and technical ability] grasps concepts and logic. It is the part of the brain that figures out how to use a computer or make sales calls by reading a book. Not surprisingly- but mistakenly- it is also the part of the brain targeted by most training programs aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence. When such programs take, in effect, a neocortical approach . . . they can even have a negative impact on people’s job performance. . . . To enhance emotional intelligence, organizations must refocus their training to include the limbic system. They must help people break old behavioral habits and establish new ones. That not only takes much more time than conventional training programs, it also requires an individualized approach.⁹

Acknowledging Goleman’s emphasis on the individualized approach to leadership development, many topo-
level company leaders hire specialists to help them and their people with leadership-effectiveness issues. By using personal coaches and mentors, they seek to accelerate the natural process of maturation. After all, complex military and business institutions can no longer afford to wait 20–30 years for their personnel to develop the full complement of cognitive and affective traits required to become effective leaders. Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-3401, Air Force Mentoring, incorporates EI principles by providing guidance for the full spectrum of Air Force leadership skills. It underscores the pivotal role of the supervisor in developing his or her subordinates in both technical and professional/personal arenas by highlighting the need to establish personal relationships with them. The AFI urges Air Force leaders to use mentoring as one of the key relational tools for building EI skills and awareness in both themselves and their subordinates.\textsuperscript{10}

Supervisors must mentor their people- especially subordinates who are supervisors- on their human skills; they must also persuade their own bosses to provide them guidance and feedback. Mentoring involves a longer and generally more comprehensive relationship between an experienced person and one who is less experienced. This ongoing relationship allows for the kind of “monitored behavior modification” that is necessary to improve EI, according to Goleman’s research.\textsuperscript{11}

Coaching tends to be a periodic or more short-term, symptom-specific encounter between two professionals. In the Air Force, it seems appropriate to expect the immediate supervisor to begin mentoring by coaching functionally organized teams. As relations with team members evolve, leaders may incorporate additional outside assistance as they deem appropriate for the growth desired. Ultimately, leaders cultivate personal relationships as they progress from coaching toward true mentoring roles. To supplement the less formal aspects of mentoring relationships, leaders may use formal feedback-and-evaluation sessions to develop their relationships with subordinates. Such activities may prove especially useful for leaders charged with supervising large organizations.\textsuperscript{12}

Goleman also points out that the limbic system takes much longer to be reprogrammed (i.e., learn new behaviors) than does the neocortex. Only after months of repetition and practice can one create “new neural pathways [that] become the . . . default option” for the emotional brain. He tells the success story of Jack, a high-paced striver who pounced on folks who didn’t meet his expectations:

Jack realized he had to improve if he wanted to advance in the company. Making such a connection is essential (must value the change). Once Jack zeroed in on areas for improvement and committed himself to making the effort, he and his coach worked up a plan to turn his day-to-day job into a learning laboratory. For instance, Jack discovered he was empathetic when things were calm, but in a crisis, he tuned out others. This tendency hampered his ability to listen to what people were telling him in the very moments he most needed to do so. Jack’s plan required him to focus on his behavior during tough situations. As soon as he felt himself tensing up, his job was to immediately step back, let the other person speak, and then ask clarifying questions. . . . Jack learned to defuse his flare-ups by entering into a dialogue instead of launching a harangue.\textsuperscript{13}

From Jack’s example, we see how one must make a commitment to change behavior. One must also appreciate the difference between universally counterproductive behavior and situation-specific ineffectiveness. For example, the competence of “initiative” isn’t always effective behavior. A person who joins a highly specialized, tightly knit group and loudly describes during his or her first week all the changes that need to occur- the clean-sweep approach to leadership- probably won’t have much influence. However, initiative may often be the exact competency called for during a crisis situation in which roles are generally understood and expectations are relatively clear. People with high EI know the difference and behave accordingly.
People who are genetically wired with higher EI need little nurturing to augment what nature gave them. Others may require time, effort, and repeated practice to reach the level of EI whereby their competencies and versatility give them the flexibility to handle ever-changing situations. Developing EI appears to be within anyone’s reach. Cultivating stronger EI can improve one’s grasp of leadership styles—especially if one develops the flexibility to use the right style in each situation.

Leadership and Emotional Intelligence at Work

The ideal leadership picture is more in line with the “invisible” leader of Eastern philosophy. Unit members carry out their mission with equal ability and enthusiasm, regardless of whether or not the boss is present. The leader’s goal is to develop subordinates in such a way that they can perform well—perhaps ever better—without him or her. This orientation contrasts our Western ideal of knighthood wherein one leader dominates in a given unit. Effective leaders don’t use dramatic gestures to get their bosses to notice them—they focus on pushing responsibilities down to subordinates and deliberately developing them to become their replacements. In fact, the overriding function of a leader is to guide and help develop their subordinates’ leadership as a guarantee of healthy units and individuals. This highly effective leader is a master of the key traits noted by EI experts, able to move smoothly from one style to another as situations dictate.

New on the Job

Gen Jerome “Jerry” O’Malley was famous for the approach he took as new commander of a unit. This powerful leader preferred to assume the role of a sponge initially. He listened and learned about the people and their strengths and developmental needs, using a patient, pleasant approach before beginning his molding and shaping process. Listening is essential in a new job. Subordinates evaluate their leaders to find out if they are trustworthy, competent, and attentive to their needs. Job requirements will refine and shape a leader’s “commander personality,” based upon the people, challenges, opportunities, and other situations. Acting too quickly after assuming command may preclude a leader from responding as flexibly as he or she might like later on. Leaders limit their range of options to act as they refine their judgments. General O’Malley serves as a role model for commanders who wish to approach a new situation and its people intelligently.

Impact of Emotional Intelligence

In the early 1980s, a frontline F-4E squadron, as heavily tasked a unit as one could find, had prepared to operate in three different theatres and could do anything asked of it. One commander of this squadron, a master aviator, was absolutely tops technically but had only average EI. A rather directive person who nevertheless could listen, he was the only individual doing the thinking and creating plans. Things were fine as long as the plan was working, but he had little flexibility and only average subordinate support when it wasn’t. He went on to complete his career honorably as a full colonel in a joint staff position. His successor, a staff officer out of the Pentagon, had been out of the flying business for several years and was only an above-average pilot—but he had extraordinary EI. By using all the tools and techniques in his portfolio, this man took a solid-gold squadron and made it superhuman; moreover, the effects spilled over to the rest of the wing. He’s currently a four-star general in the Air Force.

An earlier situation had direct combat impact during the Vietnam War. Assigned as air liaison officers to the 1st Cavalry Division of II Corps, forward air controllers (FAC) out of a certain airfield served three battalions. One could easily see the dynamics of the level of trust between the different FACs and the company or brigade commanders with whom they worked. During fast-moving, confusing ground engagements, the FACs saw much more from the air, especially in the absence of a command helicopter. The FACs who demonstrated high EI competencies routinely enjoyed greater latitude in helping the ground
commanders direct maneuvers. But the FACs who lacked developed EI—those who had not gained the complete trust and confidence of the men they served—functioned in a more limited fashion. A dramatic difference existed in the trust that the Army commanders had in these two groups of FACs—a situation that stands as a clear example of direct-combat impact.

Developing EI Competencies in Air Force Officers: A Natural Evolution

Given the growing importance of air and space power in emerging strategic and operational environments, how might we describe the integration of EI development into practical leadership experience? Recognizing that our civilian and enlisted populations also need to develop these qualities, we illustrate this process of integration in the following scenario, which follows a representative officer’s career from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel.

As newly active participants in the officer culture of the Air Force, lieutenants encounter many unfamiliar dynamics. Senior leaders, peers, and subordinate mentors, as well as personal observations and everyday trial-and-error opportunities, provide the necessary teaching tools that allow young officers to progress through entry-level leadership roles. Continuing formal education and professional military education are vital as well. Studying great leaders (and not-so-great ones) adds immeasurably to their understanding of themselves and others. Although they are junior officers, lieutenants should remember that they are key members of the Air Force’s leadership team—great responsibility accompanies their rank and position within the institution. This is the time for them to begin a career-long effort to learn about highly effective leaders, to discover how they developed, and to ask how they need to prepare themselves. Even before they find themselves in tough spots, lieutenants have opportunities to seek honest feedback and ongoing mentoring. They can refine their strengths and discover weaknesses. In fact, with time and attention, these officers can transform their weaknesses into strengths.

Because lieutenants occupy the first link in the chain of command, they often bear the brunt of challenges that accompany the mentoring of enlisted members. According to a lieutenant who served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, “As soon as we stepped off the plane at our final location, the major challenge for myself and the four other officers in our 100-man Prime BEEF team was to keep morale up. Initially, we had limited tools and equipment, poor food, grossly overcrowded living conditions, and a sense that we were just a burden on the base.”14 Few conventional or cognitive leadership-training courses could hope to equip leaders to overcome these challenges. This officer’s perception that morale became the most significant problem he encountered underscores the need to infuse leadership-development programs with EI education. The stresses of wartime operations tempo only heightened this lieutenant’s need for EI skills to keep his force operating at peak efficiency: “I found myself constantly explaining the ‘big picture’ when I didn’t know what it was. Nor did I know whether our situation would improve. I never realized how much the enlisted force depended on us for information and leadership. We spent a significant amount of time counseling and advising about personal problems. . . . I had not expected this task, and frequently I found it difficult due to the complexity of the problem or just plain lack of experience in counseling on my part.”15

This example clearly illustrates that open-ended operational deployments require Air Force leaders to possess the full spectrum of leadership styles. Although lieutenants may not cast the overarching organizational vision—the “big picture”—they often will serve as the commander’s agents who transmit and explain that vision to the troops. Leaders also must remain alert to signs of stress within the organization. The coaching style allows leaders to use the EI domains of empathy and managing emotions to counsel and mentor subordinates through the stress of long periods away from home. Indeed, this skill might be the most critical leadership component in the young company-grade officer’s leadership portfolio.
As officers move into positions of greater leadership responsibility, they should expand their portfolio by using more EI traits and fundamental leadership styles. By the time young officers have become captains, they should have achieved a technical confidence that allows them to shift gradually from focusing on themselves to focusing on others. Thus, they should consciously employ competencies associated with teamwork, which requires an ongoing awareness not only of their own growth, but also the strengths and developmental needs of their fellow workers. As officers mature in terms of self-confidence and wisdom, they should begin to focus on the traits associated with understanding others’ professional and personal strengths and abilities. Developing these EI leadership competencies, especially when captains have more work to do than extra hands to do it, becomes a conscious effort— a personal development priority. Although they still seek feedback and mentoring, maturing captains find themselves mentoring others as well.

This focus on developing other people forces captains to manage time and tasks carefully. The experiences of another Desert Storm veteran who supervised personnel-support efforts at a deployed location illustrate how the shift in focus translates into mission-oriented actions:

Within my team, I had two areas of concern. First, I had too large a team for the population we were supporting. All the airmen were from one base and all the NCOs [noncommissioned officers] were from my (different) base. Initially, the airmen had difficulty taking direction from NCOs they did not know. I split the team into two shifts, a day shift and a night shift, which kept everyone busy. The day shift handled customer inquiries while the night shift handled paperwork and computer updates. Second, I established a “forum” where both shifts aired their differences and came up with their own solutions. I also called upon my three master sergeants to lead and discipline.16

By recognizing the potential conflicts that stemmed from merging personnel from different units, this captain forged an effective team and simultaneously created an atmosphere that allowed her to mentor the senior NCOs under her command.

By the time Air Force officers become majors and lieutenant colonels, most have been responsible for significant assets or projects. In our culture, significant doesn’t necessarily mean sheer numbers of people, planes, or satellites. The Air Force generally requires few assets to deliver tactical precision and strategic effects. Midlevel officers are responsible for people and modern assets that are incredibly more efficient in defending the nation than in times past. For that reason, developing the traits and abilities described by Dr. Goleman in his leader styles becomes vital. Every platform as well as every controller’s action has the potential to produce incredible effects. This new environment calls for leaders who continually develop their own and others’ EI.

The uncertainty of the requisite tactics to combat tomorrow’s foes creates a need for astute commanders with equally engaged subordinates who act on mission-type orders. This fine-tuning is necessarily left to the people who actually place the bombs on target. The evolving environment requires more agility and flexibility than ever previously imagined. Centralized control with decentralized execution by small groups of talented individuals will become more common. In effectively led teams, the leader—one with high EI traits—capitalizes on each member’s greatest strengths to create synergies for tackling and solving real-time problems.

A supply-squadron commander in a wing of B-52s and A-10s recounted his opportunity to exercise EI when, soon after taking command, he faced dwindling funds allocation at year’s end. With each of his four flights insisting that its needs were the squadron’s top priority, he called the chief enlisted managers (CEM) (senior or chief master sergeants) together for the fuels, combat-support, procedures, and administration-support flights and told them to prioritize their requirements and justify them to each other. Later, when asked why he had approached it that way, he said, “The annual fight over end-of-year funds is a given, but I didn’t know the
The squadron commander called a follow-up meeting to have the four CEMs explain their rationales to him. The commander realized that he had an opportunity to address some long-standing communication challenges among his key enlisted leadership and thus strengthen the squadron’s team orientation. Recognizing what his squadron lacked and having the senior NCOs participate in his final decision helped the commander pave the way for continued open lines of cooperative interaction among the squadron’s flights.

Conclusion

The emerging field of study known as emotional intelligence has high importance in leadership-sensitive organizations. A cluster of skills and competencies that has great effect on leader effectiveness, EI can be learned, developed, and improved. While researchers continue to refine the field, the two key relational domains- interpersonal and intrapersonal- remain unchanged. The assumption behind EI studies, confirmed by research, maintains that leaders must understand and manage their own emotional makeup before attempting to understand and manage other people.

According to Leadership Advantage, an executive and organizational-development consulting firm, empathy plays a critical role in improving EI. The firm suggests several steps leaders can take to develop empathy:

- Keep track of missed opportunities to display empathy.
- Be aware that subordinates may not explicitly express underlying concerns.
- Never presume to know what others are feeling.
- Ask open-ended questions rather than ones that require only a simple “yes” or “no” answer.
- Practice listening without interrupting.
- Avoid being defensive.
- Allow creative time for others to express ideas without judging them.
- Work on achieving an effective balance of focus, goal orientation, and empathetic listening.

This list represents some of the practical things Air Force leaders can do for themselves and mentor others to do as they seek to enhance their EI portfolio.

The emotionally intelligent leader evolves into someone with the ability to move seamlessly from one approach or style to another, allowing the requirements of the situation and the resources at hand to dictate what he or she needs to do. A portfolio of leadership styles can serve as a vital tool for all supervisors, especially supervisors of other supervisors. Sun Tzu’s millennia-old advice holds for everyone- commanders most of all.

Notes

The amygdala is part of the limbic system, a group of brain structures that play a role in emotion, memory, and motivation. For example, electrical stimulation of the amygdala in laboratory animals can provoke fear, anger, and aggression. The hypothalamus regulates hunger, thirst, sleep, body temperature, sexual drive, and other functions.


12. The officer evaluation report has a block called “Impact on Mission Accomplishment.” According to AFI 36-2406, “You may also address the ratee’s ability to evaluate and develop subordinates here.” AFI 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems*, 1 July 2000, 46.


15. Ibid., 24.


17. Maj Howard Kosht, Department of Leadership, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, Ala., interviewed by author, August 2002.


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