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Management Skills

# Are You the Strong, Sensitive Type?

CIOs who cultivate a sensitivity to others' needs are better managers and lead more effective organizations.

BY MERIDITH LEVINSON

**LIKE YOU**, Alan Hughes believes employees should check their personal problems at the door when they enter the office. But Hughes, CIO of GE Commercial Distribution Finance in St. Louis, also realizes that doing so is not always realistic. "We all go through different crises in our lives. They're distractions. You can't help but bring them to work, either consciously or subconsciously," he says.

## Executive Summary

The term emotional intelligence (E.I.) refers to a person's ability to take control of situations by tuning in to and managing one's own and others' emotions. Leaders can use E.I. to mitigate the emotional toll personal problems and organizational changes like layoffs and mergers can have on those involved. It can help keep employee turnover low and projects on track. For example, the CIO of GE Commercial Distribution Finance minimized the negative impact of a valued employee whose divorce was affecting her performance and managed to see her through the problem period. CIOs who don't naturally possess high E.I. can acquire the skill. The first step is assessment, and an IT-related E.I. self-scoring quiz is included in this story.

Hughes injects this understanding into his work, and it pays off. Recently, one of Hughes' direct reports—a valued employee—knocked on his office door and told him that she was going through a divorce. She said she didn't think it would affect her performance. But she was late for work. She missed meetings. Her performance slipped. Hughes talked to her. "I said, 'I know you're going through a difficult time right now. One thing that I ask is, if you're not going to be in a meeting, please let me know,'" he recalls. He also worked with her and other members of the department to lighten her workload and lengthen some project deadlines. In so doing, Hughes and his team were still able to meet project milestones.

"As a leader, it's important to know those things [going on in people's personal lives] so you can make adjustments," says Hughes, who is 43 years old. If you don't, he adds, "projects will fail. Things won't get done on time. If you know what's going on and you can manage around it, chances are you can help them through their problems better too." Not to mention retaining a proven performer. Hughes incorporates what psychologists call emotional intelligence (E.I.) into his management style, and experts say CIOs would do well to follow suit.

The term *emotional intelligence* refers to a person's ability to take control of situations by tuning in to and managing one's own and others' emotions. The approach can mitigate the emotional toll personal problems and organizational changes like layoffs and mergers can have on those involved. It can help managers keep employee turnover low and projects on track.

It may sound touchy-feely, but it's not, says Wendy Alfus Rothman, president of The Wenroth Group, a human resource consultancy in New York City. "E.I. does develop softer skills, but they yield hard core results. Emotional intelligence is just that – a real intelligence. When it is coupled with a person's cognitive capacities, he or she has more complete information about a situation, and therefore can make better decisions, more accurate assessments, and create better outcomes on every level " she says.

Experts agree that E.I. directly impacts productivity and profits. For example: Richard

Boyatzis, professor and chairman of the organizational behavior department at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, assessed the senior partners in a multinational consultancy and found that those who exhibited E.I. competencies more frequently delivered over \$1 million more in annual profits from their accounts than did other senior partners.

### **The Roots of E.I.**

E.I. is actually an inherent skill that humans have possessed for thousands of years, says Fabio Sala, a Boston-based senior research consultant with Hay Group, an HR consultancy. Sala says the ability to sense emotions goes back to primitive man, when, in order to survive, he needed to quickly and accurately assess potentially dangerous situations by analyzing humans' and animals' nonverbal behaviors.

The modern study of E.I. began in the 1970s. Psychologists, most notably David McClelland, were trying to determine what makes people professionally successful. At Harvard University, McClelland studied how different organizations and the people in them worked, and tested people's so-called soft skills—how they related to others—as well as looking at their IQ and technical skills. Researchers found that soft skills were equally—if not more—important than raw intellect in determining a person's achievement and an organization's success.

Another IT-specific example demonstrates how strong E.I. can make a positive impact (and weak E.I. can hurt). Cary Cherniss, a professor of applied psychology at Rutgers University, and coeditor with Daniel Goleman of *The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace*, cites a study at Bell Labs some years ago that looked at a pair of skilled help desk technicians. One person had a good E.I. evaluation, while the other did not.

It turned out (no surprise) that when end users had problems, they sought out the emotionally intelligent help desk colleague and avoided the other. If the favorite wasn't available, end users tried to fix things themselves. The person with a stronger E.I. was not only more effective at his job, he also helped the company as a whole improve its productivity, Cherniss says.

E.I. went mainstream in the mid-1990s, when Goleman, a former research writer for *The New York Times*, published *Emotional Intelligence*, in which he argues that E.I. is the strongest indicator of an individual's success. Soon after, E.I. took the business world by storm.

### **E.I. in Action**

Hughes, the CIO of GE Commercial Distribution Finance, believes his staff member felt comfortable approaching him about her divorce because he takes time to regularly chat with employees about their work and their lives. By getting to know their staff, he says, CIOs can better sense when employees' performance is not up to snuff and can take action to help them.

Hughes also uses E.I. to deal with organizational change. Before the company was a unit of GE, it was called Deutsche Financial Services. When DFS was put up for sale three years ago, employees grew uncertain about their fate and that of the company. They debated whether to jump ship of their own volition or wait to be shown the door. To keep the company attractive to potential buyers, DFS had to look stable, and that meant keeping employee turnover low. Hughes used his E.I. capabilities to read which executives were receptive to the sale and who would be willing to help him motivate people to stay on the job. He also identified which people didn't support the sale (and therefore who wouldn't be worth his effort to convert).

"In a way, it's ruthless," says Hughes of his approach, "but it allowed me to cut my losses by not spending time on people who wouldn't make the transition and who wouldn't help me gather those on a team to move forward and get the sale done."

The end result of Hughes' E.I. savvy was that his department has had less than 5 percent attrition over the past five years. "Keeping a team together through that three year period was not easy. You really need to be in tune with people," he says.

### Learning E.I.

If, unlike Hughes, managing with emotional intelligence doesn't come naturally, you can take steps to improve. The first step is to assess your current E.I. capacity by taking a test, administered by a professional, that measures your ability to perceive, understand and manage your own and others' emotions. There are several tests available. Rothman prefers the MSCEIT because it is the only ability based model. Other popular tests include the EQ-i and the ECI.

When you determine your current level of E.I., set a clear goal for yourself. Your goal should be positive, specific and measurable, says Rutgers' Cherniss. For instance, if you find you're too critical of others, an example of an effective goal to set for yourself is, "Over the next month, I'm going to be more open-minded in meetings. I'll let participants complete their thoughts, and I'll acknowledge their contributions rather than dismiss their comments." If you wish to be more empathetic, your goal might be to try to understand what people are feeling, and during the next month when they make statements in meetings, check your understanding of what they're feeling by stating in your own words what you think they're communicating. You might even add that you're going to do this two or three times during each meeting, says Cherniss.

Since you're going to slip up from time to time, The Wenroth Group's Rothman advises you to build rituals throughout your day that will give you the opportunity to exercise your E.I.. For example, pick a time to regularly get out of your office and talk to your employees on an informal basis. If you schedule the time, you will more likely do it. People that want to work on their own self-awareness might ask another executive to observe their behavior during a meeting and give candid feedback afterwards. Rothman also recommends keeping a checklist against which you can measure whether you're achieving the goals you've set. She is a firm believer that if your goals are not concrete in behavioral terms, you will never maintain the desired changes.

Another strategy for increasing your E.I. is called behavior modeling. In behavior modeling, E.I. trainees are shown a recording of, say, an executive skillfully telling her employees about an imminent layoff. The trainees watch the video several times and try to identify a few points that made the executive's speech effective. Then the trainees each get a chance to emulate the model and give each other detailed feedback. They rehearse the skit until they master it. Then they apply what they've learned from the exercise in the real world.

Cherniss and Rothman also suggest having a coach who can give you feedback on your efforts to improve your E.I. Your coach can be a colleague or an organizational psychologist. "The positive feedback [you receive] reinforces your success and creates energy to sustain and increase your improvements," says Rothman.

Emotional intelligence by itself doesn't guarantee success, of course. But in the toughest business circumstances, staying attuned to others' feelings and motivations can help a manager move her staff forward.

Robert Falconer, technology director at 415, a San Francisco-based Web design firm he joined in 1999, saw his staff dwindle from a peak of 22 during the dotcom boom to just three now.

In bruising times such as layoffs, it's vital to reach out, says Falconer, 37. Checking in with people, is "not a matter of prying," he says. "It's being involved and concerned about people. If there are things I can do to help them on a project or outside a project, I want to know. If you're a happy employee, you do better work." 

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