

Book Review

Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, & Annie McKee
Primal Leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence
Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002

Reviewed by Mark Hammer

Though Goleman is by no means the originator of the emotional intelligence (EI) construct - credit is more properly given to Yale's Peter Salovey and University of New Hampshire's Jack Mayer his 1995 book "*Emotional Intelligence*" brought the idea to the attention of many, and the somewhat idealized claims he made for EI, coupled with the way the idea resonated with people, has kept the idea afloat and given it the currency value it presently has. His most recent book, with Boyatzis and McKee, attempts to extend the application of the EI construct into the leadership arena. Whether it does so successfully is another matter.

Perhaps the singular charm of the EI construct that gets many heads nodding is the acknowledgment that there is a whole lot more to human effectiveness than SAT scores, IQ scores, and employment tests focusing on cognitive ability. In some ways, the popularity of the popular view of EI (distinguished from the more cognitive one espoused by Mayer, Salovey and others) seems to stem chiefly from the sense of vindication it provides readers. There are probably few employees anywhere who could not name someone in their organization, at just about any level, whose seeming blindness to the feelings, needs, or motives of others, and occasional blindness to their own emotions and motives, has been disruptive to team or organizational functioning.

Of course knowing *that* something is important is not quite the same as understanding the details of what *makes* it important, or how important it really is, compared to other things. This is where Goleman et al. tend to part company with Salovey and Mayer, who generally make efforts to distance themselves from the rather strong inferences about EI that Goleman makes. The importance of soft skills, emotional self-regulation, and emotional perspective-taking to interpersonal functioning in daily and organizational life are unquestioned, but differences remain in the extent of the claims made by those studying EI empirically and those operating in the take-an-idea-and-run-with-it world of popular writing and management consulting. The inquiry has been fruitful for now but my gut sense is that EI will eventually become something like the psychodynamic tradition. In the same way that Freudian ideas continue to have a vibrant existence in literature and sociology, even though they warrant a small pro forma mention in mainstream psychology texts, EI will likely come and go in mainstream psychology but continue to enjoy an existence in the management and corporate trainer literature.

That a number of important truths about being a functional human (e.g., the importance of self-regulation and perspective-taking) are contained within the EI notion is separate from whether we need the whole EI package to continue to recognize those truths. My own bias is that we don't. The linkage to emotional intelligence in *Primal Leadership* often feels forced or

superimposed. While the book contains sound advice, and a good recap of things one may have already heard many times over, none of this advice relies on the existence of the construct of EI for its relevance or utility. It's good to be able to pump up one's employees and bring them onside with an initiative. It's good to avoid suspiciousness or hostility in a team. It's good to know how not to frustrate yourself. Whether any of that depends on EI or not is moot; it's still true. Each time I encountered a sensible insight or comment in *Primal Leadership* (and there are many, despite my protestations), I asked myself whether I needed to even know about EI to grasp the merit of the idea under discussion, and the answer was always "No".

The book has 3 major threads running through its' 256 pages of content: the characteristics of leaders whose behaviour "resonates" emotionally with the people they lead (and the advantages of that), practical ways to go about changing one's own behaviour as a leader, and configuring and maintaining teams and organizations in ways that avoid emotions from undermining their cooperation and productivity. Although the themes are somewhat linked by the thread of emotions and emotional intelligence, each could be easily addressed in a single smaller work (like a paper) focussing on that one element. Indeed, much of what the book has to say is nicely summarized in a recent brief interview with Daniel Goleman in the journal "*Leader to Leader*".

There are a couple of aspects of the book which grate on me, though no more than they do about any other book targeting the management market. First, there is the tacit assumption that leadership is best studied in CEOs of large organizations. No doubt these folks are important, and I suppose if one is a management consultant and builds books based on personal case studies of those who seek out management consultants, then that will be the data you have to work with (the same criticism that has often been levied at psychodynamic theorists, whose clientele were not randomly drawn from the populace). However, the excessive focus on them seems to be simply a rhetorical device to underscore the importance of what the writers have to say: if it is about important people then the ideas must be important. Maybe they are, and maybe they aren't. On the other hand, many readers of such books aspire to be executives one day, and reading about them provides a way to envision oneself and prepare for the role. If dreaming big gets people to think longer and deeper, then I guess that's not such a bad thing.

A second irritant, again common to books of this type, is that validation of the importance of the CEO's style is often the sales or profit for some relatively brief time period, i.e., some indicator of the "success" of the organization. This is also a rhetorical device intended to persuade, and has some logical flaws as well. Organizations vary substantially in size and any organization big enough to have millions of dollars in sales or even have a CEO likely has many hierarchical levels in between the CEO and the "infantry" of the organization. Goleman et al. often discuss the impact of the CEO's style as if it was directly tied to the needs and behaviour of front-line staff without any intermediate stages or lines of reporting, and it's not that clear that it is. Perhaps the "visionary" style they extol is a wonderful thing if and only if you have the right people in between the CEO and middle managers and supervisors. Perhaps the only effect of such a CEO (who will often have little or infrequent contact with junior staff) is to give those in between head office and front line tacit or explicit permission to behave in more effective ways. The black box of the organization in between the CEO and the little guy is touched on but rarely

explored enough to provide practical solutions. Pity. I suspect the real recipe for organizational success lies inside it.

The success of the company (or lack thereof) may also only be coincident with the CEO's style and subject to all manner of exogenous influences. What constitutes "success" is another matter. Two years ago, I imagine there were plenty of things to which we would have attributed the "success" of Enron and World-com and Nortel, with respect to CEO behaviour. All we had to do is wait a few years and the inferences would change drastically. I also don't know that all the benefits of emotional competence in leaders *ought* to be manifest in the fiscal bottom line. I have no doubts that they *can* be, but the world is full of small companies whose modest objectives, dependable client base, and steady sales provide everyone with a secure income, and what greater EI in the supervisor or owner does for such organizations is very different than what it does for an IPO-type company. Emotional competence of supervisors may well play a bigger role in the functioning of shoe store staff than it does in the functioning of multi-nationals, particularly given the number of hierarchical layers insulating front-line staff from senior management. Then, of course, there is the non-profit sector where profitability-based metrics are not applicable.

A third rhetorical device that Goleman et al. occasionally appeal to is what they call the "neuroanatomy of leadership", alluding to brain structures in dubious and vague ways as a kind of explanation. At times I thought I could have easily substituted astrological discourse. I'm not sure what the relevance of these digressions was other than to somehow persuade the reader of its "scientific-ness". They added nothing, and for those with a little more knowledge about such matters, these digressions often came across as amateurish.

Finally, I am made uncomfortable by the mapping of traits of individuals onto organizations. Emotional intelligence, whether one would treat it as a parallel class of human ability, or summarily dismiss it as little more than mere personality or a cluster of social competencies, is an *inter-individual* difference of some deep-seated and enduring form. Whatever it "is" at its' heart, it is also the outcome of lengthy socialization and learning across one's life. The corpus of skills and abilities it encompasses remains something that cannot simply be created by a weekend workshop or even a 12-month local initiative. One does not learn emotional intelligence in quite the same way that one learns a new computer operating system or second language for business travel purposes. It consists of some very automatized skills and an almost default mode of processing and managing social information from the self and from others. Those with "more" EI would be more likely to almost reflexively consider another's feelings in social situations, without having to resort to any sort of deliberate mental look-up table of factors to consider. Indeed, it is these very properties of automatic consideration of emotional information that lead to the treatment of such subject matter by some researchers as a separate "intelligence" rather than mere skills. Given such properties of EI at the level of the individual, can an organization be described as having more EI? Can one create a more emotionally intelligent organization? I would argue that on mere logical grounds alone, you can't.

That being said, organizations *can* make a point of deliberately inserting more emotionally intelligent individuals in key positions, where such skills (or maybe more importantly, their absence) can have impact, and providing both messages and mechanisms which remove incentives for behaving or operating in emotionally unintelligent ways. The sensitive, well-balanced executive may not be able to create profound emotional self-awareness in their senior managers in a meeting, a weekend, a business cycle, or even over the course of a few years, but they can provide signs that incorporating emotional awareness into one's functioning isn't such a bad thing. As hinted at earlier, what may well be the operative factor for an organization is being led by someone who grants explicit or implicit approval for others in leadership or supervisory positions to exercise whatever emotion-related skills they possess, and removing institutional obstacles to following through on such tendencies.

Readers will find the most useful chapter to be Chapter 8, which caps a section of the book devoted to Richard Boyatzis' model of self-directed learning. This chapter nicely articulates how to go about realistically reshaping one's competencies. It is the practicality of this section which lends strength here. If a book makes you think "Yeah, I should remember that the next time", then it has something going for it. Chapter 8 has that.

The key issue here is the extent to which the book is useful in either depicting innovation or sparking it. Here, I can't say. I imagine there is much in here that is ho-hum and obvious to many and at the same time a bolt out of the blue for others. It certainly doesn't spend much time and effort to articulate the link between a leadership style fueled by EI and organizational innovation, although certainly skill in managing one's own and others' emotions is an effective toolkit in leveraging innovative thinking when and *if* it occurs. My rather jaded sense is that it will be old news for those who already make it part of their management style, and frustratingly unattainable for those who do not already integrate it into how they do things.

It is worth noting that the role of emotions in the workplace - including what evokes them, how they spread, how they shape judgment, etc. - has become a hot area of inquiry in the organizational psychology field. Researchers such as Russell Cropanzano at Colorado State and Howard Weiss at Purdue University are excellent starting points for looking at this literature. Interested parties may look in the on-line programs of past annual meetings of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (<http://siop.org/Conferences/Confer.htm>) to see what is currently being done in the field. Those with a bent towards more scholarly inquiry in the EI domain might find the recent book *Emotional Intelligence in Everyday Life* (eds. J. Ciarrochi, J.P. Forgas, & J.D. Mayer, Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001) a little more to their liking.

About the Author

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