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Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers: The People Skills You Need to Achieve Outstanding Results, Second Edition



Authored by: Mersino (2013)

My Growth in Emotional Intelligence (adapted for learning purposes)

A Dangerous Situation

"Do you have any idea how dangerous it is not to be in touch with your feelings?" This question was posed to me in the summer of 2001 by Rich, a therapist who has since become my career coach and mentor. His words stopped me in my tracks. Dangerous? That was a curious word choice. What could be dangerous about not being in touch with my feelings? I was thirty-nine years old and had been a successful project manager (PM) for over seventeen years. I had a record of slow but steady career progression. I had been certified as a Project Management Professional (PMP) since 1995. I owned my own project management consulting business and lived, taught, and even breathed project management. No one had ever asked me about feelings before. No one had ever mentioned that there might be danger involved. What could be dangerous? What was so important about feelings?

Rich's question resonated with me, but I wasn't sure why. It didn't feel dangerous to be out of touch with my emotions. However, I had a nagging sense that he saw or knew things that I didn't. On some level I recognized that the way I approached work wasn't always effective. Hard work did not always make the difference in the outcomes of the projects I managed. I wondered how others seemed to succeed with less effort. I also felt insecure about the lack of personal and professional relationships I had built, and I suspected that it was hurting me. As much as I wanted to deny that my career and relationship challenges might be related to my emotions, I began to suspect that Rich might be right.

The truth was that I wasn't aware of my feelings or emotions. I was about as emotionally aware as a small green soap dish. If I could have taken an emotional intelligence test at that time, I would have been considered the village idiot.

With Rich's help, I began to see a connection between my lack of emotional awareness and my limited success in project management. Up to that point, my project management career had been a bumpy road. While not quite a dead end street, my career path hadn't exactly taken a superhighway either. Lately that road didn't seem to be taking me anywhere. I had recently been passed over for a key promotion at Unisys. My career ladder had literally run out of rungs. Perhaps I had been promoted to my level of incompetence and was therefore living proof of the Peter Principle.

Eventually I found I could no longer ignore Rich's question about the danger, and I decided to do something about it. I knew I needed to make some changes. I was ready to make more of an investment in my emotions and relationships. Initially, it wasn't for personal reasons. It was all about ROI, my return on investment for improving my emotional intelligence. I believed that my career would benefit from it. And after spending most of the last five years working on my emotional intelligence, I am happy to report that my career has benefited significantly.

As I grew, I learned how my work relationships reflected my world view. Until then, my relationships with my project teams and other stakeholders were weak or nonexistent. That was largely the result of my project management style as a taskmaster. I was all business. Unfortunately, I placed a higher value on tasks, productivity, and outcomes than on relationships. I lacked empathy. I had a way of driving the people on my project teams that was hostile and irresponsible. My coworkers may have called me driven, but they would never have characterized me as a warm and fuzzy relationship person. At best people warmed up to me over time.

My big shift came when I began to recognize the value of emotions and relationships in the workplace. I became aware of feelings and learned to trust them as a source of information. I learned to recognize and acknowledge when I felt angry, scared, or happy. I also began to pay attention to what those around me

were feeling and to consider that information when making decisions. By doing this, I was able to better manage my projects and to be a better leader of people.

I learned the importance of stakeholder relationships and invested in relationships with friends, coworkers, and other leaders. I learned how critical relationships and support were to achieving success on large projects. My relationships began to grow, along with my ability to lead others.

The results were nothing short of impressive. The investment and changes I made began to improve my effectiveness as a PM. Within a year of beginning my work on emotions and relationships, I was asked to lead a fast-moving project of twelve people. As I demonstrated success with this team, my responsibilities grew until I was managing seventy-five people across the United States and internationally. As I continued to learn and apply my skills in this area, I was able effectively to lead large teams, build strong relationships with project stakeholders, and achieve the goals of the projects I was managing.

Emotional Mastery for Project Managers

I am quite sure that many of you are thinking "of course, you idiot" when I talk about mastery of emotions leading to success as a PM. You were probably among the five million people who bought one of Daniel Goleman's books on emotional intelligence—and then actually read it. Yes, of course emotions play a role at work, no matter what your position. They are of special concern to those of us in project management and leadership. Emotions play a direct role in our success as PMs and leaders.

I was not one of the five million people who bought Goleman's first book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, when it came out in 1997. In fact, I wasn't even sure what emotional intelligence was when I first began working on my emotional awareness. It wasn't until I decided to include emotional intelligence as part of the curriculum for the project management course I taught at Northwestern University that I began to read the published materials on the topic. By then I had accepted the fact that I lacked emotional intelligence, proving, I suppose, that admitting I had a problem was the first step toward resolution. More than that, I had begun to grow, make changes, and experience greater success as a PM.

After my own powerful experience with emotional intelligence, I conducted research to see what experience other PMs had with emotional intelligence. In late 2005, I conducted a brief survey of over 100 PMs to determine their beliefs and attitudes about emotional intelligence. The results were interesting. Most of the PMs I surveyed thought that emotional intelligence was important to success as a PM and were interested in learning more. However, the survey also indicated that most PMs didn't know very much about emotional intelligence.

Since 2005, I've presented this topic at over forty different events attended by thousands of PMs. Most people identify readily with the topic. While there are some who are "naturals" at emotional intelligence, most of the people I spoke with wanted to know how they could learn more about emotions and emotional mastery.

Is this surprising? Not really. Sure, PMs understand basic project management techniques and the contents of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*. They have also pursued PMP certification and become black-belt masters of project scheduling tools, such as MS Project, Artemis, or NIKU. In fact, those are prerequisites for success even as a junior PM; consider them entry criteria. But to advance your career, you will need strong interpersonal skills or soft skills—and emotional intelligence provides the framework for those skills. Do you see a connection between emotional intelligence and your own success as a PM? Are you trying to advance your career? Do you ever feel frustrated by lack of opportunity even though you have done all you can to improve your technical project management skills? Perhaps you are doing things the hard way as I did, working harder to make up for soft skills. You cannot make up for soft skills with hard work.

To advance as a PM requires understanding and mastery of emotional intelligence concepts. Yes, mastery of emotional intelligence. PMs who master emotional intelligence can develop their careers by delivering

more consistently and by taking on larger and more important projects. In fact, success with large and complex projects depends largely on the level of emotional intelligence of the PM.

PMs who master emotional intelligence will set themselves apart from other PMs. They will be able to achieve more with the same team. They will excel in their careers. And they will feel more satisfied with themselves and their relationships with others.

PMs who master emotional intelligence will set themselves apart from other PMs.

The Rules for Project Managers Have Changed

When I started in project management back in the late 1980s, the project triple constraints ruled. On time, on budget, and within scope was the PM's mantra. That may still be true, but I think that things have gotten a whole lot more complicated, and I think there are a lot more expectations of PMs today.

Have you heard the phrase "do more with less?" You are not alone. Not only do PMs need to manage the triple constraint, they need to do it with fewer resources. This could include project administrators or support people who directly aid the PM, but it might also include key resources needed for the team.

In addition to doing more with less, PMs are expected to be domain experts. The days of being a good PM who could lead any team are over; PMs today need to be SAP savvy, or have a Lean 6 Sigma black belt, or have CRM, CPA, or MSCE certification. I've seen ads for project management positions that require ITAR—and I don't even know what that is!

Finally, I believe there is more pressure on PMs to lead the way through change. All organizations are under pressure to change and innovate. One has only to look at what happened to Kodak or Sears as prime examples of what happens when you don't change fast enough. Both Kodak and Sears were once leaders in their industries. Now they are mere shells of their former selves because they didn't change as fast as their competitors. Organizations often use projects or programs to introduce or drive change. So PMs are usually the ones who come face to face with resistance and inertia and must be good at implementing change for their projects to be successful.

What Is Emotional Intelligence?

The term emotional intelligence was actually coined by two psychologists, Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, in 1990. I am a little surprised they didn't call it the Salomayer Principle or something similar. I bet if they had known that Daniel Goleman would come along in 1995 and use the term for the title of his best-selling book, they would certainly have used their own names. In any case, they simply called it emotional intelligence and gave it the following definition:

Emotional Intelligence: "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action."

- Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer^[2]

While Salovey and Mayer continued their research work, in 1995 Goleman wrote *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. This was the right message at the right time, and soon Goleman was a best-selling author whose name became synonymous with emotional intelligence. Goleman has since gone on to write several more books on the topic. In a recent book, Goleman and coauthor Cary Cherniss state that emotional intelligence, at the most general level, refers to:

"the abilities to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and in others"

- Daniel Goleman and Gary Cherniss^[3]

As a PM, I hold a pragmatic view of emotional intelligence, thinking of it as "knowing and managing our own emotions and those of others for improved performance." I am interested in the application of emotional

intelligence to life in general, as well as specifically to the field of project management. In a project setting, the understanding and use of emotions helps us to have more enjoyable, predictable, and successful projects. That is what the remainder of this book is about.

[2]Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer. *Emotional Intelligence, Imagination Cognition, and Personality*, Volume 9, No. 3. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Co., 1990.

[3]Cary Cherniss and David Goleman. *The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001.

The Good News About Emotional Intelligence

The good news about emotional intelligence is that no matter where you are now, most experts agree that you can improve your level of emotional intelligence. In fact, experts agree that you can continue to improve your level over the course of your life. I know this to be true because I have done it. Over the last five years I have gone from "village idiot" to being aware of and managing emotions. Maybe "emotional genius" is in reach for me!

Here is more good news. Improvements in your emotional intelligence will help your career as a PM. No matter what your emotional starting point is, if you improve your level of emotional intelligence, you will do a better job of managing projects. The remainder of this book is going to tell you how to do just that. We are going to discuss in detail the various aspects of emotional intelligence; how they apply in the project management environment, and the specific activities and exercises you can use to help you improve your emotional intelligence. This will undoubtedly also help you to succeed as a PM.