



# How to Gain Emotional Intelligence as a Leader

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Emotionally intelligent leaders possess something uncommon: the ability to build and sustain productive relationships across functions, levels, and geographies — even under pressure and in high-stakes situations.

This capacity to read the room, understand impact, and intentionally shape interactions to move work forward is one of the top 5 differentiating traits separating the best leaders from the rest.

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## What emotional intelligence (EQ) really is and what it is not

Emotional intelligence is not about being nice or avoiding hard conversations. It is a grounded understanding of how your feelings affect yourself, other people, and performance — combined with the self-awareness and skill to navigate complexity with people who have different motivations, backgrounds, and worldviews.



High-EQ leaders are not chameleons who sacrifice their values to please others. They are steady and consistent in what they stand for.

Leaders with high EQ:

- Work hard to understand the formative experiences and motivations of the people around them, not just their job roles and responsibilities
- Lead with unwavering principles and drive while remaining agile in their relationships because they recognize that everyone is motivated by their own unique story
- Have developed genuine self-knowledge and can regulate their emotions rather than being hijacked by them when stakes are high

Importantly, high-EQ leaders are not chameleons who sacrifice their values to please others. They are steady and consistent in what they stand for. But they have the skill to adjust how they communicate, negotiate, and build relationships without abandoning their principles — and that flexibility is what sets them apart when times get tough.

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## Why EQ matters now more than ever

For decades, it was easy to discount emotional intelligence as a “soft” leadership skill — interesting but less important than technical expertise or business acumen. That thinking is becoming increasingly outdated. Research by scholars like Patrick Lencioni and Jim Collins has demonstrated a clear connection between organizational culture and financial performance. Higher-EQ leaders tend to cultivate healthier cultures that attract talent, reduce turnover, encourage innovation, and deliver better and sustainable results.

Several workforce trends are accelerating this shift:

- The evolution of workforce expectations around psychological safety and human dignity
- The advancement of women and younger generations into leadership roles, reshaping how we define effective leadership
- The growing evidence that command-and-control management produces short-term compliance but long-term mediocrity

The bar is being raised for leaders. In a volatile, complex environment where collaboration and innovation are non-negotiable, leaders without EQ eventually become liabilities.



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# The four pillars of high emotional intelligence

## 1. Self-knowledge and self-regulation

High-EQ leaders are in touch with their emotions and understand their triggers – the situations that activate defensiveness, fear, or ego. More importantly, they have developed the capacity to pause before reacting, creating space for choice rather than impulse.

This self-regulation becomes critical in high-pressure moments:

- When delivering tough feedback, they can be direct without being demeaning because they manage and move beyond their own anxiety or frustration, and they are receiver-based in their communication.
- When facing ambiguity or a setback, they can remain calm and analytical instead of panicking or blaming.
- When making principle-based decisions that disappoint people they care about, they are secure enough to hold the line without collapsing into guilt or resentment.

That steadiness sends a powerful message to others: *You can trust this person, especially when the stakes are high.*

## 2. Understanding others and building trust

High-EQ leaders invest time in genuinely understanding how other people see the world. This is not sympathy – feeling sorry for someone – but empathy: the ability to step into their perspective and appreciate what matters to them.

They do this by:

- Asking thoughtful questions and listening to understand, not just to formulate a response
- Resisting the impulse to judge others' motivations through their own lens
- Acknowledging the emotional dimensions of decisions, not just the logical ones

Over time, this approach builds trust because people experience being genuinely seen and heard, which is a surprisingly rare gift in most organizations.



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### 3. Navigating complexity and building bridges

Most organizations require leaders who can find common ground among constituencies, even when interests and values are competing. High-EQ leaders excel at this because they resist the human tendency to force dilemmas into binary either/or choices.

Instead, they:

- See the gray when others see only black and white, helping reframe either/or dilemmas into both/and paradoxes
- Negotiate win-win solutions by helping different groups find common ground and see how their core interests can be honored, even if not all preferences are met
- Communicate in ways that adjust to the audience and context while staying true to their principles

### 4. Inspiring sustainable performance

High-EQ leaders understand that how results are achieved matters as much as what results are achieved. They balance pushing for accountability with pulling people toward growth.

They tend to be:

- Contagiously optimistic without being Pollyannaish, especially in the face of adversity
- Genuinely committed to the growth of their people, finding more gratification in helping others achieve than in personal achievement alone
- Skilled at reframing setbacks as “not winning yet” rather than permanent defeats

That attitude shapes culture. People learn that failure is information that feeds learning and growth, not a career-ending event.

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# How to develop emotional intelligence

The encouraging reality is that emotional intelligence is not fixed. It can be learned and strengthened throughout your career. Several practices accelerate this growth:

## 1. Expand your perspective

Read and engage with people and ideas outside your comfort zone. Actively seek contrarian points of view; they sharpen thinking and deepen humility.

## 2. Know your triggers

Observe the situations that activate defensiveness, fear, or ego in you. Notice patterns in how you behave when triggered, and what impact those reactions have on others.

## 3. Understand and take ownership of your emotions

Your feelings and behaviors originate within you — not from other people. Others may trigger reactions, but you are responsible for how you interpret what happens and how you respond. Deepening your understanding of what triggers you is essential self-knowledge, and that requires slowing down long enough to notice what you actually feel as well as the root causes of your emotions.

A practical cue for leaders: when someone asks how you *feel* about a situation, and you answer by describing what you are *doing* about it — a common refrain in the C-suite — you may be more out of touch with your emotional experience than you realize. Reconnecting with those emotions is a critical leadership capability, not a weakness, and therapy or coaching can be powerful support in that work.

To be clear: there are absolutely times when feelings must be set aside to drive progress and deliver results. But suppression as a *strategy* — rather than a temporary tactic — rarely serves you or your organization over the long haul. As Carl Jung is often quoted, “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life, and you will call it fate.”



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## 4. Seek unvarnished feedback

Build relationships with people willing to give you honest input about your impact on those around you, not just validation. Receive it with genuine curiosity and gratitude, not defensiveness.

## 5. Listen with sincere curiosity

Practice active listening — where you seek understanding, not confirmation. Use follow-up questions to clarify and deepen connection. Recall Voltaire's advice: "Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers."

## 6. Build diverse and complementary relationships

Intentionally develop relationships with people from different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Different perspectives broaden thinking and reveal blind spots.

## 7. Practice self-care

Protect your energy and emotional resilience by setting healthy boundaries. You cannot serve others well if you are constantly drained.

## 8. Reflect regularly

Keep a journal capturing insights, questions, and implications from your reading, conversations, and experiences.



Over time, the entire culture shifts—becoming less political, less defensive, and more innovative, collaborative, and accountable.

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## The multiplier effect

Emotionally intelligent leaders are force multipliers because they cultivate organizations where people feel seen, valued, and motivated to do their best work. Talented people flock to them. Others want to emulate their collaborative, principle-based approach because emotionally intelligent and servant-minded leaders bring out the best in others, not just themselves. Over time, the entire culture shifts — becoming less political, less defensive, and more innovative, collaborative, and accountable.

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## About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at [jdrgrowthpartners.com](http://jdrgrowthpartners.com) and [The Bridge to Growth](#).



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