



The roots of emotional intelligence have been traced back as far as Darwin, but it was Daniel Goleman's 1996 best-seller which thrust the subject into the public arena. Dismissed by some as pop psychology, it was welcomed by others as providing the most workable model so far – defining emotional intelligence in terms of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management.

“Emotional intelligence is distinguished from personality as it looks at the intersection of cognition – how we think – and emotion – how we feel,” says Professor Peter Jordan of the Griffith Business School. “Thinking produces conclusions, whereas emotions create action. Without emotion we would be left with lots of conclusions we are unable to implement.”

The name is open to misinterpretation.

“Some people who hear the word ‘emotional’ think it’s all about crying and group hugs, which it most definitely isn’t” says Sue Langley, director of the consultancy Emotional Intelligence Worldwide. “It’s about the intelligent use of emotions.”

Doug Aberle FAICD believes that emotional intelligence is critical to any high-performing team, including a board of directors. An engineer by profession, Aberle is Managing Director of Western Power and Deputy Chair of the Australian National Committee for CIGRE, an international organisation dedicated to the identification and development of solutions to technical issues in the power supply sector. He is also a qualified psychotherapist.

“If we are unable to recognise our own emotional states and our responses to others, and to recognise others’ states and how to connect with them, we don’t get to deal with the content,” he says. “Most of our energy is consumed by dealing with our emotional responses – something I don’t think is generally well understood and which doesn’t get a lot of airplay.

“Our emotions aren’t good or bad they simply are, and that’s important,” he says. “Unless we’re willing to accept them non-judgementally we don’t have a solid platform for engaging with the rest of the world. While we don’t have much choice about our emotional response to things we do have a choice as to where we put our attention and how we behave. If we have a judgement that, say, anger is bad, when we start to feel angry we try to suppress it. But the emotion wants a voice and it will find one, whether that’s through the tone of our voice, the look in our eyes or the fact that we’ve withdrawn. Other people around the table will sense that, but when it’s not actually named, it looms large and begins to impact on how everybody responds – and that starts to take energy and focus away from what actually needs to be discussed.”

Aberle also warns about the energy-sapping effects of projection – responding to a trigger from our past by projecting a presumed emotion on to others.

“If someone frowns, for instance, we might project anger and then start to modify our own behaviour accordingly, and that could dramatically impair the quality of our contribution. Emotional intelligence gives us the capacity to say ‘I notice you’re frowning and I’m imagining that you’re feeling angry. Can I check that?’.

“You might find that the person was just concentrating really hard. Or he might actually be angry, in which case that needs to get a voice too, be dealt with and cleared away so that you can bring the energy and your attention back to the subject at hand. In the boardroom that’s pretty important. You’re often talking about challenging and difficult issues – you need to clear the decks in order to make decisions that are as properly informed as possible.”

Michael Rosmarin, a consultant at Egon Zehnder International, believes that directors with high levels of emotional intelligence are likely to be more effective at influencing others and collaborating with a team.

“They are able to put forward a view or counterview without offending,” he says. “They acknowledge other people’s contribution and bring in points in a way that builds on the conversation.”

Chris Golis FAICD cites hiring and firing the CEO is a critical test of emotional intelligence. He is well placed to form the opinion – as well as writing books on emotional intelligence he has served as a director of some 30 companies and chairman of several listed public companies. In the course of his career he has had to fire around 300 people, including at least a dozen CEOs.

“It’s always a tough call,” he says. “You meet a CEO once a month, get to know them then, after 12 or 18 months, you have to tap them on the shoulder and say goodbye. The fact that it’s so tough means a CEO has to stuff up pretty badly in order to get fired. The higher the level of emotional intelligence on the board, the better the matter is likely to be handled and the more likely it is that the right person will be in the job.”

Langley has seen a lack of emotional intelligence create problems within boards and also between boards.

“At the moment I know of two companies considering a merger,” she says. “One has worked on increasing emotional intelligence, the other has not. Now they’ve hit a sticking point because the second board can’t communicate in a functional way. They’re caught up in detail, losing sight of the big picture and unable to reach a decision, which is causing conflict and blow-ups in board meetings. What could be a really good move for both parties is likely to fall through.”

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

As a director on the board of the not-for-profit Advantage Foundation, Ann-Marie Docherty, GAICD, who is also Managing Director of Australasian Executive Coaching, considers her ability to influence a diverse community to be as important as her corporate experience.

“When I’m looking to raise funds or to spread news about specific projects, I tap into all of my existing relationships and networks as I look to developing others,” she says. “My aim is to build teamwork, collaboration and partnerships along the way. I know that, the more self-aware I become, the better I can tailor my strengths to achieve greater influence.”

Self awareness also allowed Docherty to understand that there is a need to manage strengths as well as weaknesses.

"I have always seen my confidence as a strength but, through feedback, I came to realise that it could feel like intimidation to people who are less confident or, perhaps, more introverted, than I am."

Golis points out that high levels of emotional intelligence aren't automatically benign.

"One of the main drivers of the type of person I call 'The Hustler' is greed," he says. "The Hustler is very good at assessing people and does it in order to manipulate them. It's a game for them. If they pick up that you don't have the same drivers as they do they'll see you as a loser and treat you accordingly. You need to be aware of that in order to manage it."

There could even be an argument for 'too much' emotional intelligence.

"Recent research has shown that individuals with high emotional intelligence may be at a disadvantage as their desire to maintain and promote relationships may effect their ability to achieve the optimal outcome" says Jordan. "For instance, students with high emotional intelligence did worse on a negotiation simulation than those with low emotional intelligence.

"However, rather than looking at emotional intelligence overall, it may be more appropriate to say that some aspects of emotional intelligence are not good in large doses. If you have high self awareness of emotions, for example, this could result in your being distracted from taking a broader view of issues."

Richard Leblanc is a corporate governance specialist, management consultant, professor, lawyer and independent advisor. In the context of corporate governance, he defines emotional intelligence as the capacity to be aware of, understand, display and regulate empathy, feelings and emotions within highly complex, dynamic interactions within the board and between the board and management.

"It is possible that a director or chair who is overly empathetic, aware or sensitive could be indecisive, too process oriented or in some other way ineffective," he says. "It really depends on how you define terms and your scale. Also, a good matrix will capture director competencies beyond emotional intelligence."

### **Recruiting for emotional intelligence**

While the brief for a new director may not specify emotional intelligence the request may be present in spirit.

"I can honestly say that no-one uses that language when I'm doing a search for a non-executive director or chairman," says Alison Gaines, Global Practice Leader of Board Consulting at Gerard Daniels. "However, most of the questions I'm asked to put to referees touch on those skills. They want to know how the person gets along with other people, their interpersonal style in the boardroom, whether they're persuasive and whether they build or destroy trust.

"It's the same with books on governance – there may be no mention of emotional intelligence in the index but, inside, there's a lot of focus on the way people behave. I think there's a real sense these days that a successful boardroom is as much about behaviour as it is about outcomes. After all, if you're pulling a group of people together on an irregular basis to make important strategic decisions, the way they behave together and the amount of trust and candour that they can create is critical to how effective they are."

"Clients often ask for a humanistic leader, particularly when they're looking for a chairman," says Michael Rosmarin. "They want someone who is able to put themselves in others' shoes; someone who can shape a discussion in a way that's thoughtful and encourages everyone to make a contribution and then guide the conversation to an effective conclusion."

Leblanc points out that many of the tasks allocated to the chair make emotional intelligence crucial to this role. He lists managing and working with strong-willed CEOs; recognising and

managing the creative tension between the board and CEO; challenging views and opinions constructively; managing issues and board deliberations appropriately; dealing with critic-directors; building consensus; reacting under pressure and in the event of crisis; mentoring and developing director-peers; and using power appropriately.

Once again the language may be lagging behind the reality.

“We have many chairs of company boards who are in their sixties or even into their seventies – a generation where the language of emotional intelligence is not easily recognised or used,” says Lynette Glendinning FAICD, a director of management consulting firm Tempo Strategies. “Yet the good ones would be very aware that some directors are difficult, lack self awareness and are unable to moderate their own behaviour while others are much more attuned to what’s going on in the group, more able to moderate their own behaviour and, when it comes to a performance review, are more open to feedback. All of this is underpinned by emotional intelligence.

“A chair has to craft a corpus that comes together as a mini community. When you’re working with people who don’t have reasonable levels of emotional intelligence that becomes extremely difficult – particularly if you’re going to sustain robust debate rather than simply having everyone getting on.”

Rosmarin believes that increased governance is encouraging greater diligence from directors, in terms of selecting both boards to join and directors to join them.

“They’re conscious of needing both a balance of skills and diversity in the boardroom,” he says. “To me, that means a diversity of views not just a mix of more visible aspects like gender and culture. A board can look diverse but still exhibit ‘group think’.”

Emotional intelligence is unlikely to be taken into account in the same way as some of the ‘harder’ skills until it can be properly defined and assessed.

“Emotional intelligence is in an early stage of development,” says Jordan. “The real debate is between self report measures (asking individuals ‘how emotionally intelligent are you?’) and ability measures, which try to apply regular intelligence testing regimes to measure emotional intelligence. These are both useful for helping individuals to reflect on their skills and abilities – but can a definitive measure be identified at this stage? I would have to say no.”

However, research conducted by Professor Jordan with Jane Murray and Professor Neal Ashkanasy does support the idea that emotional intelligence can be taught.

“The research compared training of three groups, one group had emotional intelligence training, one group had basic communication and conflict resolution training and one group had no training,” says. “The results showed that emotional intelligence training resulted in this group achieving small but positive increases in emotional intelligence when compared with the other groups.”

People can certainly increase self awareness and develop techniques on how to lead a discussion but, as Rosmarin points out, it’s only going to happen if they’re aware, open to feedback and prepared to learn.

For Doug Aberle, the choice is simple – would you rather be dealing with a difficult problem with a good-willed group of people who are working together, or people who are trying to score points off each other?

“Sitting with a good-willed group of people is very energising and liberating, and that’s what emotional intelligence supports,” he says. “The power is inestimable.”