

Seven Steps to Emotional Intelligence

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In New York State, one of the most contentious issues- even outside of education circles- is the overwhelming nature of student testing today. Teacher and administrator energies are focused on testing and test-taking at the expense of authentic instruction. In fact, the consequences of current testing in our schools resulted in an estimated 165,000 students opting out of this year's standardized tests. Many educators continue to question the Common Core curriculum. Teachers are being asked to do more and deliver in ways that are industrializing our schools. Principals are faced with policies that make it difficult to foster a culture of learning and growing. Emotions and emotional reactions are overtaking the schoolhouse and the social landscape. This is an opportune time for the use of emotional intelligence (EI) in education.

As leaders, it is important to recognize how our behaviors and reactions influence our feelings and actions (Lynn, 2005). Others can affect our decision-making and result in anger, inertia or confusion (Lynn, 2005). However, emotional intelligence – or competence through self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, 2014)- has the potential to enable school leaders to better handle today's controversies and create a more responsive environment for others.

The study of emotional intelligence includes many key researchers. One of the models of EI is the result of studies by Salovey, Mayer and Caruso (2004). Salovey et al. define EI as “the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking”(p.197). Goleman’s model of EI focuses on interpersonal awareness and social facility (2006). The brain can attune itself to others and cause one to adjust and interact in alignment with others. In Bar-On’s model of emotional intelligence (2010), there are interrelated emotional and social competencies and skills that determine how effectively individuals understand and express themselves, relate with other, and cope with daily demands.

Daniel Goleman said it best. “For star performers in all jobs, in every field, emotional competence is twice as important as purely cognitive abilities” (Goleman, 1998, p.34). The unavoidable disruptions of school reform are very difficult to manage, but leaders who are also highly skilled in dealing with their emotions and the emotions of others can be more effective in leading change (Moore, 2009). For school leaders who want to incorporate emotional intelligence in the daily work of school administrators, consider seven steps described by Lynn (2005) in her book, *The EQ Difference*. Lynn’s seven steps are adapted for educators in this article, and may be tools that help administrators apply emotional intelligence in today’s contentious atmosphere.

Step 1 is OBSERVE. Observe your actions and the actions of others as you interact on a daily basis. This helps build your self-awareness. When talking with an upset parent, focus on your voice and tone, your breathing, and changes in your nonverbal behavior. Consider these factors when observing others and in monitoring your reactions to the physical environment. If you come across a classroom that is disorganized, impersonal and set up without flexibility for student interaction, check your thought-process, your nonverbal behavior. Observe with the idea

of understanding what triggers your emotional reactions, positively and negatively - and how they impact your behavior. The capacity to observe and adjust your reactions improves your ability to stay on course as a leader. In the instance of the disorganized classroom, coaching the teacher with a recognition of your own attitudes may help produce a more positive mindset. Being more aware of your own behaviors and the behaviors of others makes it less likely to redirect your intentions or detract from your goal.

Step 2 is INTERPRET. Once you have increased self-awareness through observation, recognize the full range of your own predictable emotional reactions and behaviors. Doing this enables you to live and act with intention. In other words, if you can predict how you react to specific triggers, you will be less likely to hijack your intended behaviors. When a struggling student enters your office for the third time in one day with a behavior referral, recognize the frustration that might be triggered in you. If a counselor seems to take little initiative to address a student's need, gather information before reaching conclusions. Confirmation bias can easily occur, which is when you look to confirm your position and ignore conflicting data. Be aware of confirmation bias as an obstacle to interpreting behaviors.

Step 3 is PAUSE. A pause serves as a method for shifting gears or slowing down to be a more intentional and focused leader. One way to pause, and therefore be more intentional, is to breathe slowly and deeply while counting to eight. While breathing, think of a personal mantra such as "it's ok" or "is this really important in the bigger picture?" If an angry parent demands a solution that is too harsh or lacks understanding of your role, use a physical movement to solidify your pause such as taking a sip of water, walking to your desk, or removing your glasses. An intentional pause allows you to reframe the situation and be more purposeful in your behaviors. It also provides time for you to listen carefully before reacting.

Step 4 is DIRECT. Self-awareness is very helpful but it needs the complement of application to be most effective. You may be well aware of your behaviors but directing your behavior is just as important as recognizing the need to shift. Again, this increases your ability to live by your intentions. When a grievance from the teachers' union shows up in your email, be aware that your response can result in a variety of actions and outcomes. Choose a response that fosters collaboration, if that is the result you intend. Purposefully directing your words and your behaviors enables you to accurately reflect your purpose. In part, this can be accomplished by visualizing the end result or your intention. Using humor to reduce tension is another way to redirect your thinking and stay on course.

Step 5 is REFLECT. Reflection is practiced when you ask yourself questions that provide insight into your behaviors and actions. Examples: How well did I live my purpose in my interactions at school today? What did I do well today? What positive/negative effect did I have on teachers today? The practice of reflection can be accomplished by journaling or by keeping a "lessons learned" log. The job of a principal, for example, can often be very lonely and very isolating. Stress can build up and overwhelm you by the end of a school day. Writing down joyful events can make a world of difference over time – the kindergartner who ran to hug you as he entered the building; the father that sent a note thanking you for visiting his daughter during a recent hospital stay; or the teacher that asked you to take part in a math lesson. Reflection can also be accomplished by talking with a mentor or a trusted friend. Some leaders reflect by simply reading to acquire more knowledge and make comparisons. In a central administrative position, talking with a mentor can often bring clarity to a very confusing mix of policies and guidelines. Reflection can serve as a warm up or a rehearsal before an important

meeting or series of initiatives. Practicing methods of reflection can anchor your awareness and prepare you for the next challenge.

Step 6 is CELEBRATE. Appreciate intangible achievements. Recognize the progress you are making in behaving intentionally – progress with things unconnected to the testing culture. You may be experiencing greater ease in listening to others, or might be more satisfied in communicating your message to others. A distressed parent may, after your effective listening and responding, express a new found trust in your district culture. A struggling student may feel more success in school after your encouragement. And remember that disorganized classroom? Perhaps you are less likely to react to a common trigger and may avoid intimidating a new teacher. Recognize the ability to determine what matters and what is important in life. This understanding solidifies your core values and intentions.

Step 7 is REPEAT. Practicing emotional intelligence is a dynamic, circular process. Increased self-awareness does not follow a straight ahead route with a definitive end. New experiences add to your insights. Practice helps you to be more competent and directs your attention to be more intentional in your behaviors and actions.

Finally, one of the many benefits of becoming more emotionally intelligent is the ability to demonstrate more empathy for others. As we gain experience as principals, directors and school administrators, we realize over time that those we serve have many, many challenges in their own lives. We need to be at our best for the families that trust us with their children, the teachers that work hard each day, and the advocates that wrestle over school policies. If we are more aware of our own behaviors and triggers, we can be more fully present and understanding of the individuals around us – especially in these contentious times for public education.

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