

# Is Emotional Intelligence the Key to Effective Change Management?



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Emotional Intelligence (EQ), popularized by best-selling author [Daniel Goleman](#) has been validated with multiple [research studies](#) to be a key differentiator in work performance. Emotions, which make us human, propel us to require interpersonal connections. Beginning at infancy, our very survival depends upon others, as dramatized in the "[Still Face](#)" [experiment](#).

In these Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) times, EQ is arguably more important than ever, as emotions are on high alert when experiencing change and stress. Massive changes are occurring both in the workplace and in global macroeconomic trends, as discussed in [Forbes](#) and [The Conference Board](#). Such changes trigger strong emotions, which may promote tunnel vision, narrowing our productive choices.

## ***What Is EQ?***

EQ is often described as having four dimensions:

1. **Self-awareness** is foundational; it enables us to be aware of our own responses and emotions.
2. **Self-management** is the application of self-awareness to make more conscious decisions about how to respond.
3. **Social awareness** requires paying attention to others--their feelings (stated and unstated), and being aware of context and environment.
4. **Social management** applies all dimensions to have productive interactions with others.

The **awareness** dimensions focus on noticing reactions and responses to events and people—taking in information and observations. In contrast, the **management** dimensions require conscious decisions about how to act.

## ***Why EQ Is Essential for Change Management***

Change triggers strong emotions, which may promote tunnel vision, narrowing our productive choices. As leaders in the learning and talent development field, EQ is essential to how we help others cope with change, such as organizational restructuring, new technologies, automation, mergers and acquisitions, globalization, new sources of competition and changing business models.

Fundamentally, **change management** is a process to accelerate productive adoption of change. Moving successfully through change inevitably produces strong emotions; stakeholders assess what the change means to them which will be highly variable. **William Bridges**, the pre-eminent authority on change and transitions, suggested that change involves multiple stages. A dip in productivity is expected as people cope with

confusion, frustration and denial, before they can successfully become engaged around new beginnings.

**Neuroscience findings** revealed that we crave stability; uncertainty triggers neural responses in the anterior cingulate cortex, the insula, and the amygdala, with physiological responses as well. Leveraging EQ means that we can be more effective at understanding various stakeholders' interests, their concerns and how to effectively engage with them—ideally to become champions, but if that is not possible, then to neutralize their resistance so they don't create a chain reaction of negativity to the proposed change.

We know that change messaging is most effective when it addresses the “What's in it for me” and the WIIFM is fundamentally personal. When embarking on a change effort, it is best to solicit a broad cross-section of employees so we can better understand and anticipate the myriad responses.

Change communication works when it is relevant, aligned and consistent—and people in organizations will be highly alert to inconsistencies between actions and words. Messaging has to flow from the top, but it is in the one-to-one conversations and team meetings where the overarching themes about change can best be translated into personal meaning. In this sense, a conversation is the fundamental unit of communication. Learning leaders and change managers play a pivotal role in helping managers to conduct effective conversations that will promote positive action.

## ***How EQ Helps You as a Professional***

With change occurring all around us, we need to be aware of our own emotional responses to be able to help others. EQ is an essential tool in our professional toolbox, providing us with awareness to others' responses and being able to more effectively judge where our interventions are proving effective—or missing the mark, without being defensive.

EQ also helps us to re-charge and avoid undue stress. Our use of self is a key tool in the stages of change: assessment, planning, action and sustaining positive results. It enables us to acknowledge our successes, see our misses more clearly and take effective action!

Here are six ways EQ is a key tool in change management:

**Mitigate Stress.** Stress is widely recognized as playing an important role in mental and physical health, including [high blood pressure, diabetes, depression and anxiety](#). While the [stress response](#) is helpful when faced with an immediate crisis (such as a car coming towards you in your lane) increasing focus, respiration and visual acuity, it is too easily launched in everyday interactions. In non-emergency responses, it is disproportional and can lead to chronic health problems. EQ helps address stress by allowing us to recognize and take ameliorative action so it doesn't become chronic.

**Increase Learning Agility.** To keep pace with changes in the workplace requires the ability to continue to learn—new technologies, evolving work relationships, and understanding emerging trends. By its nature, learning requires a degree of vulnerability: being open to making mistakes and even failure; and a willingness to stretch comfort zones while climbing the learning curve. As a [Harvard Business Review article](#) details, people with

high emotional intelligence have greater adaptability, demonstrate more curiosity, and are open to lessons from both successes and failures. Emotional intelligence helps lower defensiveness and negativity that blocks our ability to learn, adapt and innovate. **Gallup findings** show the majority of workers not engaged at work, "retired on the job:" these employees are not actively learning.

**Promote Employee Recognition.** Another source of stress common in today's workplaces is feeling undervalued. Recent **neuroscience research** has revealed that this kind of psychological stress triggers the same receptors in the brain as physical pain. While activating EQ will not change all workplace dynamics, it can help to temper reactions and promote a more balanced perspective about self-worth that comes from other sources, such as family, volunteering and creative pursuits.

**Make Better Decisions.** When our emotions are in high gear, the rational part of the brain is switched off. As a result, we are in a reactive mode and may take actions that feel good in the short-term (such as telling off the boss) but have negative long-term consequences. Too often, our emotional responses are activated by **"incidental" anxiety**, which limits our ability to generate a range of options and then pick the best decision, considering pros and cons of each.

**Take Productive Action.** When emotions run high but are not recognized, responses often cluster at either end of a counter-productive spectrum, from paralysis on one end (being unable to respond), to impulsivity (reacting to events without full consideration) at the other extreme. Emotional intelligence allows for needed perspective, providing a wide-

angle lens on problems, challenges, and opportunities to better craft informed decisions.

**Recover From Adversity.** Setbacks, which are an inevitable part of life, are more pronounced by instability in our workplaces and society. EQ can help us to draw on our inner strength, increase our self-confidence and widen the lens to assess difficult situations in productive ways, such as seeking advice; setting new priorities and finding ways to be resilient.

Emotional intelligence is a lifelong journey, evolving professionally as we use our skills to help organizations. On a personal level, as we face new challenges, we learn more about ourselves, enabling us to better respond to change as we move through the lifecycle.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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