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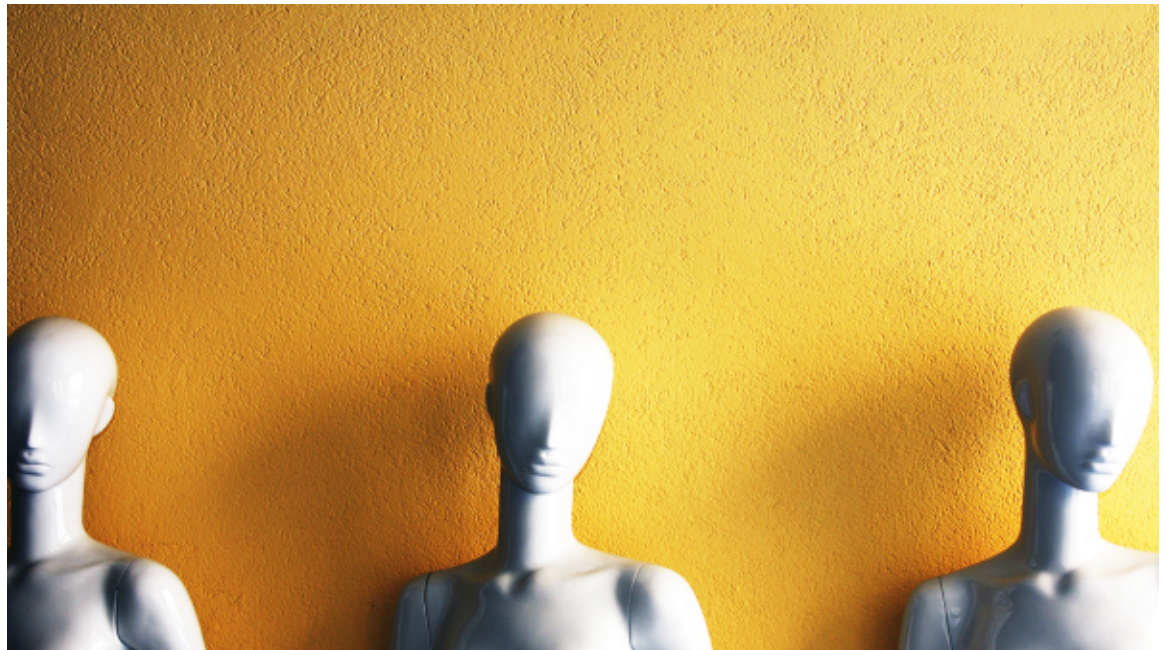
by Muriel Maignan Wilkins

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Signs That You Lack Emotional Intelligence

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In my ten years as an executive coach, I have never had someone raise his hand and declare that he needs to work on his emotional intelligence. Yet I can't count the number of times I've heard from people that the one thing their colleague needs to work on is emotional intelligence. This is the problem: those who most need to develop it are the ones who least realize it. The [data](#) showing that emotional intelligence is a key differentiator between star performers and the rest of the pack is irrefutable. Nevertheless, there are some who never embrace the skill for themselves — or who wait until it's too late.

Take Craig (not his real name), a coaching client of mine, who showed tremendous potential and a strong ability to drive results for his company. The issue with Craig was the way in which he got those results. When asked to describe him, his colleagues would say things like: “he’s a bull in a china shop;” “he has sharp elbows;” and “he leaves dead bodies in his path.” His approach to executing projects was not sustainable as he wasn’t able to motivate, attract and retain good talent. His direct reports pointed out how frequently Craig seemed oblivious to how he demeaned others. His boss commented on Craig’s impatience and his propensity to lash out at his peers. When I shared this feedback with Craig, he seemed taken aback and was convinced that I had heard wrong. He didn’t have the self-awareness or empathy that are hallmarks of emotional intelligence.

Here are some of the telltale signs that you need to work on your emotional intelligence:

- You often feel like others don’t get the point and it makes you impatient and frustrated.
- You’re surprised when others are sensitive to your comments or jokes and you think they’re overreacting.
- You think being liked at work is overrated.
- You weigh in early with your assertions and defend them with rigor.
- You hold others to the same high expectations you hold for yourself.
- You find others are to blame for most of the issues on your team.
- You find it annoying when others expect you to know how they feel.

So what do you do if you recognized yourself in this list? Here are four strategies:

1. Get feedback. You can’t work on a problem you don’t understand. A critical component of emotional intelligence is self-awareness — this is the ability to recognize and stay cognizant of behaviors in the moment. Whether you engage in a 360 assessment or simply ask a few people what they observe, this step is critical in heightening your sense of what you do or don’t do. And don’t just find excuses for your behavior. That defeats the purpose. Rather, listen to the feedback, try to understand it, and own it. When Craig initially heard what others thought of him, he quickly became defensive. But when he accepted the feedback, he moved to owning it and became determined to change.

2. Beware of the gap between intent and impact. Those with weak emotional intelligence often underestimate what a negative impact their words and actions have on others. They ignore the gap between what they mean to say and what others actually hear. Here are some common examples of what those with low emotional intelligence may say and how it’s actually heard:

What you say: *“At the end of the day, it’s all about getting the work done.”*

What others hear: *“All I care about is the results and if some are offended along the way, so be it.”*

What you say: *“If I can understand it, anyone can.”*

What others hear: “*You’re not smart enough to get this.*”

What you say: “*I don’t see what the big deal is.*”

What others hear: “*I don’t really care how you feel.*”

Regardless of what you intend to mean, think about how your words are going to impact others and whether that’s how you want them to feel. Craig was notorious for saying things that made others bristle, but he began to consider the impact of his words. Before every meeting, he spent a few minutes asking himself: What is the impression I want to make? How do I want people to feel about me at the end? How do I need to frame my message to reach that objective?

3. Press the pause button: Having high emotional intelligence means making choices about how you respond to situations, rather than having a knee-jerk reaction. For example, Craig tended to interrupt and shoot down other people’s ideas before they could complete their thoughts. This behavior was a reaction to his fear of losing control of the discussion and wasting time. So he started to take pauses before reacting. There are two important pauses to take:

Pause to listen to yourself. When Craig was getting impatient and frustrated in discussions, he often felt his jaw clench and his chest tighten. By recognizing these physical signs, he was able to pause and remind himself that he feared losing control. As a result, Craig was better able to determine how he wanted to respond, rather than relying on his default of lashing out.

Pause to listen to others. Listening means helping others feel like you’ve understood them (even if you don’t agree with them). It’s not the same as not saying anything. It’s simply giving others a chance to convey their ideas before you jump in.

4. Wear both shoes. People often suggest you “put yourself in the other person’s shoes” to develop empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, but you shouldn’t dismiss how you feel. You need to wear both shoes — understanding both your agenda *and* theirs and seeing any situation from both sides. Craig shifted his approach from “Here are my concerns” to “These are my issues, and I hear your concerns. Let’s determine a way forward that takes both into consideration.”

Strengthening your emotional intelligence takes commitment, discipline, and a genuine belief in its value. With time and practice, though, you’ll find that the results you achieve far outweigh the effort it took to get there.

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