

5 ways to boost your emotional intelligence

Is emotional intelligence (also known as EQ) just a bunch of touchy-feely gobbledygook? Make fun of it at your own peril. According to psychologist Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, EQ is what sets high performers apart. In his book, Goleman shares some startling stats, including:



- Studies from leading companies on what causes some employees to be so much more successful than others indicate that “emotional intelligence is twice as important as IQ [and] technical skill combined.” Plus, Goleman says, the higher you go in the ranks, the more important EQ becomes.
- A Pepsico global study showed that when division heads were strong in skills attributable to EQ, they outperformed their annual revenue goals by 15-20 percent; conversely, those weak in EQ skills underperformed by about 20 percent.

So what is EQ? And how can you get it?

Goleman’s definition of emotional intelligence

Goleman says that EQ does not mean “being nice.” In fact, sometimes it might require you to be blunt about truths others want to avoid.

EQ can't be reduced to any single characteristic or behavior. Goleman explains that it's a spectrum of competencies representing “how we manage ourselves and ... our relationships.” That's pretty darn broad. Fortunately, he breaks it down into five key areas:

- **Self-awareness** (knowledge of your feelings, motives, strengths, weaknesses, etc., as well as how you affect others)
- **Ability to manage emotions** (e.g., stay calm under stress, not let negative emotions derail you, avoid saying things that you'll later regret)
- **Motivation** (i.e., ability to be a self-starter and stay focused on goals over time, even when obstacles appear)
- **Empathy** (i.e., ability to “read” people and understand what they're feeling)
- **Social skills** (i.e., ability to build relationships and manage conflict)

5 EQ-enhancing tips to try

EQ can be learned. However, boosting your EQ is hard. It takes time — according to Goleman, at least three to six months. You have to want to do it.

Choose the tips below that seem best for you, keeping in mind that these are just five of many possible approaches.

1. Regularly ask for feedback.

Studies repeatedly show that most of us are much worse at self-assessment than we realize. As Cornell psychology professor David Dunning explains in this [NPR interview](#), “We apply a lot of positive spin to evidence we get about ourselves.” Dunning goes on to say that those around us, such as supervisors, peers and direct reports, are usually much better at gauging our strengths and weaknesses.

Check your assumptions about yourself by seeking feedback from trusted co-workers. Keep a list of what you hear, and watch for patterns. Doing this on a regular basis will help you zero in on the truth, building self-awareness. It will also probably help strengthen your work relationships, since many people appreciate being asked their opinion (it’s a sign of respect).

Learn [how to ask for feedback](#).

2. List your emotional “triggers” and create a plan for managing them.

What gets under your skin? Maybe it’s people who make excuses, meetings that run long or unwashed dishes stacking up in the communal kitchen. List these triggers and then consider how they typically make you act. You’re probably not going to stop feeling angered or annoyed by them, and that’s perfectly OK. The point is not to turn off your emotions, but handle them effectively. Formulating a pre-emptive plan is often half the battle.

For example, if you know that one of your direct reports tends to complain in her 1-on-1s — and that you tend to get short with her because it drives you crazy — you could decide to focus on breathing, counting to 10 and then paraphrasing back what she says the next time she complains to you. You might even discover that she becomes less negative if she feels that she’s being heard, rather than judged.

Other easy but effective ways to manage emotions: ask for breaks when you get overwhelmed or upset, write your feelings down instead of immediately voicing them, think through potential solutions before you bring up problems or criticize others, and reduce stress by getting enough sleep, exercise and healthy food.

For tips on managing your emotions during difficult conversations, check out our article [How to have a difficult conversation](#).

3. Practice your listening and observation skills.

The better we understand others, the easier it is to empathize with them and resolve conflicts. No wonder, then, that people with a lot of EQ tend to be incredible listeners and observers.

Give the following tactics a try:

- *Don't interrupt.* You'll be tempted to if things get heated. Fight the urge. Try writing your point down instead so that you remember it when the person finishes.
- *Paraphrase back.* Summarizing what you've just heard shows you're listening and also illuminates any gaps in understanding.
- *Ask open-ended and clarifying questions.* If you hear something that confuses or upsets you, dig deeper with questions such as "Can you say a little more about why you think that?" and "What else?"
- *Watch body language and facial expressions carefully.* Maybe a direct report agrees to take on a new project, but his eyes keep darting away and his feet are pointed toward the door when he says yes. Signals like this could indicate that he's not really on board.

4. Align your goals with what motivates you.

Emotionally intelligent people have a strong understanding of what excites and drives them, and are able to leverage that understanding to find jobs appropriate for them, as well as stay focused and engaged over time. Do you know why you took the job you're in, and what you hope to achieve — for yourself, your team and your company?

If so, consider how you're doing and whether you might need to make some adjustments (our article on [course-correcting and following through](#) on goals can help). And if not, you may want to try [setting and shaping key goals](#) based on an honest assessment of what you really want to accomplish in your job and career.

5. Show genuine appreciation for others.

This is a small but totally underrated thing that anyone — introverts, extroverts and everyone in between — can do to improve their social skills. People have a deep need to feel valued. Never underestimate the power of a heartfelt compliment, thank-you or opportunity to give credit where credit is due.