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# Research Associate Summary Report

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Resource

## The importance of Emotional Intelligence to effective school leadership

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## Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence which demonstrates that effective leadership is critical to school improvement. For instance, The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08 states, 'The quality of the leadership and management remains, with that of teaching and learning, a key factor in a school's success...' (HMCI 2008: 30).

At the same time, recent years have seen a rapid increase in interest in the link between Emotional Intelligence [EI] and effective leadership. For instance Stein and Book claim that "most deals are 50 per cent emotion" and conclude that "successful CEOs shine in the area of emotional intelligence" while "unsuccessful CEOs put strategy before people" (Stein and Book 2006: 30-31).

However while there is evidence to demonstrate the significant role EI may play in effective leadership, there appears to be some danger that this theme may come to dominate discussions on leadership, resulting in other significant attributes and skills being overlooked. For instance, the National College's (formerly the National College for School Leadership, NCSL) (NCSL 2006) evaluation of the primary strategy consultant leaders [PSCL] programme emphasised the importance of effective communication and high expectations [along with the EI-related theme of empathy] in instances when PSCLs were most effective.

This study explores perceptions of the significance of EI amongst primary headteachers and children centre managers, a large proportion of whom were deemed by Ofsted as 'outstanding' in their most recent inspection. Opinions were gathered through the use of a structured questionnaire completed by 51 heads and senior managers, and explored further in interviews and discussions with 12 'outstanding' leaders in educational settings. Data was collated during 2008.

## Findings

### **Three quarters of heads rated EI as 'very important'**

In the survey, 73 per cent of headteachers rated EI as 'very important' – markedly higher than for senior managers [61 per cent]. Men were slightly more likely to view EI in these terms, with 76 per cent stating it was 'very important' compared with 71 per cent of their female colleagues.

Aspects of EI which were viewed as particularly important centred on being able to:

- rise above personal differences
- bounce back from difficult situations/experiences
- deal with other people's anger effectively and
- spot unrest/anxiety/anger swiftly and respond appropriately

In contrast, sharing thoughts and feelings with others, and helping people to work through their emotions were seen as very important by one in five respondents.

Comments from interviewees supported and echoed these themes. For instance, one headteacher described how “mutual trust between leaders and staff is vital in schools,” while another stressed that simply “understanding how people work” is a key factor in effective leadership. A third senior manager described positive relationships as “the bedrock of successful schools.”

Relationships were consistently highlighted as both the most and least enjoyable part of the leadership role. Critically it was relationships with adults – parents, governors and staff – which were the greatest source of anxiety. Nurturing other adults through ‘on-the-job’ development was described as the most satisfying area of relationships, which in turn was seen to demand strong personal abilities in offering guidance, empathising, encouraging and displaying inter-personal sensitivity.

When respondents were asked to spontaneously list qualities of effective leaders, more EI related qualities emerged than any other category. This may suggest that elements associated with EI are more commonly viewed as innate personal qualities than elements associated with expectations and communication.

## **High expectations and effective communications are also important**

This survey found that communications and expectations were also viewed as very important by a considerable, but slightly lower, proportion of heads and senior leaders.

70 per cent of headteachers viewed high expectations as very important, as did 69 per cent of senior managers. Ensuring a clear focus on the organisation’s goals, identifying and challenging under-performance and ensuring high standards across the whole organisation were major themes within this, while sharing the vision with others was also critical. One interviewee summarised much of this by noting that “**demonstrating integrity, conviction and respect, whilst communicating and engaging with others are essential ingredients for strong leadership.**” Thus simply getting on and empathising with others is insufficient to achieve genuine improvements in performance and outcomes needed. Instead as one senior manager noted, “**ensuring mutual and meaningful trust between leader and followers was vital.**”

There is arguably a strong connection between expectations and retaining a positive outlook, which was spontaneously highlighted as the single most important character trait for effective leaders.

While the proportions were lower, a majority of headteachers and senior managers also found effective communications to be very important [57 per cent and 51 per cent respectively]. Clarity of written communication was seen as especially important by headteachers, along with putting people at ease in interpersonal interactions. Senior managers placed more emphasis on always ensuring clarity in verbal/oral communication and being able to motivate and inspire others through communication. One headteacher summarised these issues by describing 'interpersonal skills' and 'an ability to relate to and communicate with a variety of audiences' as "very important."

When asked to spontaneously list skills for effective leadership, more communication related skills emerged than those relating to either expectations or EI. This would suggest that senior leaders may view communication as an area which may be positively enhanced through professional development, rather than dependent upon one's underlying personal traits and nature.

## Conclusions, recommendations and implications

Evidence from this study indicates that these senior leaders and headteachers viewed EI as the most important qualities for effective school leadership. However, there is also clear evidence that EI offered no guarantee of success on its own, but rather was highly interdependent on high expectations and effective communication.

Responses from participants indicate that differences may exist as to the basis of these three elements. More specifically, communication may appear to be more commonly viewed as a leadership skill, with the inference that this may be positively developed through professional development activity. In contrast EI was more commonly viewed a personal quality, with high expectations seen as a character trait. The extent to which such qualities and traits may be enhanced by training and development or rather are more intrinsic and resistant to external influence remains unclear and may benefit from further exploration.

Notwithstanding this, discussions during interviews highlighted marked variations in leaders' perceptions of EI and how it should be applied in the role of leadership. It may therefore be appropriate for the professional development of school leaders to give greater attention to raising understanding of this, thereby encouraging leaders to reflect on its significance and their own perspective on it. In doing so, it may help to promote greater consciousness among individuals of their actual levels of competency in this field and improved understanding of the potential benefits and limitations of EI.

## References

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