

Managing with Emotional Intelligence

Brandi Porter

Developing effective interpersonal relationships is critical to successful organizational management. Managers can employ emotional intelligence (EI) to build trust among employees, to effectively handle crises, and to produce an efficient, team-oriented work environment. EI is defined as being able to “recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and others.”¹ It involves both internal and external characteristics and includes both cognitive and interpersonal skill sets.²

Managers with EI are aware that situations are influenced by one’s own actions as well as those of other individuals. Moreover, they place value on relationships with others and they see situations as bigger than themselves. Managing through EI takes much time and energy. Sometimes it would be easier to tackle a problem or task on one’s own, but the emotionally intelligent manager sees the value in shared responsibility and accountability. Highly skilled EI leaders often see managing with emotional intelligence as the best management style to produce high levels of output and success for themselves, their employees, and their organization. This article focuses on how the author has used EI to help her excel as a library manager.

Emotional Intelligence

Many library managers enter library management because they are chosen. They likely received little management training as part of their degree program, with minimal time dedicated to learning how to empower and motivate employees. Much like this scenario, I received little management education and rose to management within a year of completing library school.

My early management experiences were often made more difficult by a large age difference between myself and those who reported to me. Therefore, I had to learn quickly how to be an effective manager of staff with more life and professional experience than I had. My personal management style began to take shape by incorporating EI.

These skills have definitely gotten better with practice and through interactions with staff. Additionally, some of my greatest learning experiences have come from the mistakes I have made when not recognizing my own emotions or when letting other people’s emotions shape my behavior. I have found that much of library management is about interactions with others—whether, it is employees, students, faculty, or the public—so being able

to effectively communicate and listen to others is critical.

The ability to manage with EI is by no means a small feat. Developing shared goals among diverse staff takes enormous time and energy; these goals cannot be forced upon employees no matter how hard one tries. As a library director, I often have to rely on librarians and frontline staff to carry out the service that I am responsible for. Therefore, the most effective circumstances are when I can work with staff members to develop shared service values. An example of this practice was working with librarians to develop an assessment tool for information literacy sessions at a previous institution. While I could have developed the evaluation myself, it was far more effective for us to do so together. Not only did staff better understand the survey and the rationale for it, there was buy in because they played a part in shaping the process and instrument.

The library manager is just one part of the library and cannot alone control the outcome of the work. The manager, however, does have a strong ability to influence, but inevitably relies on others who work for her to achieve a goal. Therefore, any truly successful manager must learn how to work with and through others toward the desired outcome.

Library Literature on EI

Library literature on the topic of EI focuses predominantly on the skill sets of library directors with EI and how those skills affect organizational success. Some research exists that investigates recruitment efforts to hire staff with EI skills.³ Others note the importance of EI skills among library staff who serve as mid-level managers⁴ or reference librarians,⁵ due to their responsibilities to lead team projects or effectively understand and communicate a user’s need during the reference interview.

Moreover, there is recognition that any library staff member with EI skills can contribute to organizational effectiveness and increased morale.⁶ It is increasingly common for library directors who possess this intelligence to be sought. However, several authors suggest that EI can be learned, improved upon, and even transferred to employees by managers.⁷

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EI as a Management Skill

As a library director, I have found EI critical in building staff relationships. Literature suggests employees who have positive relationships with their supervisors are more likely to stay in that job.⁸ Additionally, employee turnover has tremendous costs to an institution in time, energy, and lost knowledge.

Where possible I attempt to work with employees to improve performance rather than ignore problems or move toward termination. Instead, I attempt to select the appropriate approach in dealing with performance issues and to make certain that the right employees are in positions for which they are best suited.

EI has enabled me to understand the feelings of my employees and how they are likely to respond in a given situation. The ability to recognize and understand other's emotions has also helped me to feel more confident in approaching many delicate issues with my own emotions under control. I have found that being an emotionally centered manager helps employees to trust me as they build confidence in what they can expect when they bring an issue to my attention.

Managers can learn and improve EI if there is a willingness to do so. Mentoring relationships, conferences, and literature provide supplements to traditional library management courses in this skill area. Moreover, practicing emotional awareness and empathy in interpersonal communications with staff is a good way to improve EI. Analyzing good and bad staff interactions provides opportunities to assess one's EI levels.

Handling Difficult Conversations with EI

Some of the most difficult times in my management career have come from dealing with problems in the workplace, particularly poor employee performance. Rarely is it well received to tell others that they have done something wrong or that their performance is sub-standard. It is in those times that EI has been critical for me in achieving positive outcomes. It is almost inevitable that an employee is going to react negatively to this type of discussion. In such situations, I have found that displaying genuine compassion and understanding for my employees is important, as well as ultimately managing my own emotions.

I often remind myself to first listen to an employee's viewpoint, and not to assume I know what is going on in a situation before speaking with them. I recognize my experiences, values, and knowledge shape the lens through which I see an issue and that it could be incorrect or simply different from my employee's. This is why I make sure to provide employees an opportunity to share their perspective on a situation, and work hard at listening to their message. I have found that after doing so, I have the best opportunity for my message to be received. It doesn't mean that it always works, but I make every attempt to give these

conversations the best chance possible to turn out positive. In those instances where I have been able to work together with a staff member to resolve a performance issue, our relationship has been strengthened and our institution has benefitted.

The toughest decisions as a manager that I have had to make were in choosing to keep or terminate poor performing employees. In those situations, understanding my own emotions and being sensitive to the emotions of the other person helped me to have honest, open, and productive conversations with employees. These understandings allowed me to honor the work of the employee and to treat them with respect and dignity even when addressing difficult performance issues. On occasion termination has been the end result, but in these instances, I felt comfortable that the process was fair and equitable.

EI with Peers and Supervisors

Emotional intelligence skills are just as important in enabling effective relationships with colleagues and supervisors, no matter where they sit in the hierarchical structure. It is finding a way to influence a situation affecting others when there may be no power structure or prior relationship involved. There are also often competing interests at the peer level leading to disagreements. And when conflicts arise, supervisors appreciate employees who can effectively manage their relationships with colleagues. Therefore, it is in an employee's best interest to find a way to manage disagreements while preserving collegial relationships.

In my experience, it can be a monumental challenge to communicate with a supervisor with little EI; I have experienced situations in which managing my emotions only infuriated my less than emotionally centered supervisor. But even in this situation, it was better for me to remain poised and professional as the alternative would have simply added more volatility.

Listening, watching, and adjusting to the reactions of others is an effective use of EI in the professional environment. Ultimately, I remember just as with difficult employee situations, a hostile response from a colleague or supervisor likely has more to do with their own emotions than anything about me personally. I am still learning that over time library managers can use their EI skills to learn how best to approach the difficult colleague or supervisor in a manner in which they can effectively receive the information needed to convey.

Empowering Others through EI

Some of my most enjoyable times as a library manager are working with enthusiastic or exceptionally competent employees. I have also come to realize that while

some employees enter a job and excel, many more can be coached, supported, or mentored into such success. One of my former employees was hired into a job in which he liked and was good at, but for which it was not his passion. Through conversations I discovered his additional skill sets and professional aspirations. I moved him into a new role despite some concerns by my supervisor, who did not see the value of giving a new employee the job he wanted instead of the job he accepted. While giving the employee the opportunity to grow in his position, he was able to complete the core functions he was hired to perform as well as the new ones he enjoyed doing. He flourished in his new role, and more importantly he has become a highly valued long-term employee of the institution.

Summary

Emotional intelligence has undoubtedly made my work as a library manager more effective and more enjoyable. While not always easy, developing trusting relationships with employees often leads to more productive environments and employees who support and contribute to the overall mission of the library. Successful library managers can use these skills to interact productively in all types of professional situations and among diverse personality groups, ultimately making them more valuable to their institutions.

While literature on the topic of EI is plentiful, applications of EI in library leadership and library services are not yet well explored. Future research for libraries surrounding the topic of EI might focus on exploring whether EI leads

to greater success in assessing and planning library services relevant to the user. The importance of EI for both manager and staff in impacting positive user experiences is unknown, but it is a potentially relevant area of research for libraries striving to be more user centered.

References

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