

Report to Legal Management

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How To Change — Practical Steps for Enhancing Your Emotional Intelligence



Douglas B. Richardson

By Douglas B. Richardson

Have you been getting some not-so-subtle hints that while your legal skills are above reproach, there are some real gaps in your people skills or your “emotional intelligence?” Maybe it’s an offhand comment from a senior partner or mentor, a hard body-shot in your annual performance review, a furious client telling you to hit the road, or missing the cut when you responded to a major corporation’s RFP. Perhaps the feedback is that your leadership skills are sub-par, or that you rub people the wrong way or don’t handle confrontation effectively. Maybe you’re accused of being insensitive or arrogant at times, or that you’re short on political astuteness. Maybe your peers and younger colleagues see you as an overly competitive self-aggrandizer, a passive pushover, an overbearing bully, or a pathetic people-pleaser. One way or the other, you’re getting the message that you sometimes lack the ability to relate appropriately and professionally with diverse people in diverse situations.

A lot of law firms are sending the same message to their attorneys at all levels. In a recent professional development conference, the keynote speaker put it this way:

Among lawyers today, “competency” has a bigger, broader meaning. In short, *competency* includes both technical competencies and behavioral competencies. It includes the ability to build

relationships — with clients, with colleagues, with professionals and non-professionals...with *everyone* relevant to the success of an engagement or transaction. Effective leadership includes both a strong task-orientation and an understanding of how to work with and through people to accomplish firm goals. Today, lawyers’ professional development must address both hard legal skills and so-called “soft skills.”¹

However your wake-up call arrives, the message is clear: *You have to change. You have to improve your interpersonal skills and situational savvy.* But just how do you engineer such a change? Or, to put a finer point on it: What specifically *should* I change? What specifically can I change? What do I do to change? How do I make sure any beneficial changes will *stick*?

The good news is that any lawyer can enhance his or her repertoire of interpersonal skills, and the process does not require

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years of therapy. Constructive self-development is not a matter of undertaking a complete personality transplant. Despite what an irate client or exasperated partner says, no one is “totally clueless,” “a complete jerk” or “hopeless.” Your job is to work on the most important things, not on everything. So the first step is to get focused and *draw boundaries*.

To target your efforts, you may want to draw on the conceptual model of emotional intelligence. Author Daniel Goleman describes emotional intelligence, or EQ, as a *set of related competencies* that support our ability to create and manage all kinds of relationships effectively and to communicate appropriately in a variety of interpersonal situations.² Unlike your intellectual intelligence – your “IQ” – which can’t be changed much after early infancy, EQ competencies *can be learned and practiced*.

There are, according to Goleman, four major components of EQ: 1) Self-awareness; 2) Self-management; 3) Social awareness (being both empathetic and attuned to diverse social situations); and 4) Social skills (which include leadership and collaboration abilities). Each of these broad areas embraces several specific competencies, some of which you may possess in abundance and some of which may be a little thin. For example, lawyers typically are stronger in the self-management department and softer in the empathy and collaboration departments.

A variety of standardized self-assessment instruments and personality profiles can paint a pretty accurate picture of your social strengths and soft-spots. In all these assessments, lawyers tend to show pronounced personality patterns: *high on candor, autonomy, and personal achievement, but lower on empathy, team play, collaboration, affiliation and sensitivity*. The traits demonstrated by lawyers are common personality

traits of people who self-select into a career defined largely by subject-matter expertise, individual accomplishment and constant competition. In many situations, these traits operate as highly-desirable traits. In others, they don’t. That’s why there are all those arrogant lawyer jokes.

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Many lawyers, law firms and legal departments now are embracing formal assessment of personal style, using tools like the Birkman Advanced Report, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and Emotional Intelligence Inventory. The virtue of these is that they are objective and non-judgmental. They allow groups of attorneys to be compared on similar scales. Altman Weil is well-equipped to help firms undertake and manage this assessment process and then apply the results constructively.

If you’re willing to be straight with yourself, however, even without formal assessment you can identify areas where you may need some personal self-development. One way to do this is to translate the abstract feedback you get about yourself from others into *concrete examples of observable behaviors*. Unless you’re bucking for deep psychotherapy, developing better interpersonal skills has less to do with rewiring your inner psyche than with adjusting how you respond to certain kinds of people and situations. How colleagues and clients relate to you depends on how

they interpret your actions; frankly, your intent isn’t nearly as relevant as the impact of your actions. Saying, “I didn’t intend to offend you” usually won’t get you off the hook.

Therefore, when someone says you are something (like arrogant, pessimistic, oversensitive, impatient, abrasive, etc.), try reframing these unhelpful overgeneralizations in terms of *specific, observable behaviors*. What exactly is it that I *do*, for example, that creates the impression that I’m insensitive? Do I interrupt others? Keep myself emotionally distant? Call people ugly names in front of others? Reveal secrets? Avoid eye contact? Fail to treat people as individuals or call them by name?

To focus on specific behaviors (or clusters of related behaviors), try taking the attached *Lawyers’ EQ Quick Quiz*³ on page 8. It may help you get a fast feel for areas on which to focus your personal change efforts. If you score yourself “10” on all 20 EQ competencies, you’re either perfect, in denial, lying or wildly unself-aware. In any case, you may proceed to another article. But if you find a couple of areas where you feel a little zing of self-recognition as you jot down a 2 or a 3, try focusing your efforts there first.

Okay, are you done with the self-assessment? Hopefully, it created a little insight. That’s good. But although no meaningful change comes without insight, insight in and of itself does not produce change. It’s just the wake-up call. Now you have to frame the issues, create an action plan, keep that plan top-of-mind, identify new behaviors, practice those behaviors, get feedback on those behaviors – and do all of this while chalking up 200 billable hours this month. Sounds daunting, doesn’t it? It helps to subdivide the process into a sequenced action punch-list:

1. Assess Your Role. First, review your work role and determine which EQ competencies really are

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relevant to your area and style of practice. For example, leadership skills may not be essential if you're a first-year associate, or client relations may not be important if the firm doesn't expect you to be a rainmaker.

2. Assess yourself. Review your *EQ Quick Quiz* and select no more than three competency areas where you believe improvement is desirable.

3. Honestly gauge your readiness and motivation for change. Will the gains and benefits of greater EQ be worth the pain and effort of making the change?

4. Create a simple, plain-English self-directed learning plan keyed to learning or extinguishing specific behaviors.

5. Enlist the help of some trusted people willing to provide you with candid feedback on an ongoing basis. If your firm or department has a mentoring program, great! This is what mentors are for. Share your plan with them. Agree with them about the type of feedback that will be most helpful to you, how it is to be given, how often and for how long. Partners may find it harder to ask for feedback from professional peers, but it's worth finding a colleague who's willing to give you the straight skinny on how you come across.

6. Consciously practice new behaviors. This initially will feel stilted, stiff and awkward...rather like learning to ski or mastering a topspin forehand in tennis. When your focus fades and your self-scrutiny jumps the tracks, don't get impatient with yourself. Refocus and keep your action steps top-of-mind for as long as possible.

7. Replay, reframe, reality-test and debrief over and over. Ask for more feedback.

LAWYERS EQ QUICK QUIZ

On a scale from 1-10, 10 being the highest score, please rate your level of personal comfort and proficiency in each of the following categories:

1. SELF-AWARENESS

___ **Emotional Self-Awareness** (I recognize my emotions and their effects on others)

___ **Accurate Self-Assessment** (I accurately understand my strengths and my limitations)

___ **Self-Confidence** (I have a strong sense of my self-worth and my capabilities)

___ **Achievement Orientation** (I have a strong drive to perform excellently)

___ **Communicating Openly & Clearly** (I send clear, convincing, consistent messages)

___ **Developing Others** (I sense others' developmental needs and bolster their abilities)

___ **Change Catalyst** (I initiate and manage change effectively and comfortably)

• Working Effectively With Others

___ **Building Powerful Personal Bonds** (I create authentic, lasting relationships)

___ **Teamwork & Collaboration** (I work collaboratively toward shared goals)

___ **Managing Conflict & Disagreement** (I acknowledge and resolve disagreements effectively and comfortably)

2. SELF-MANAGEMENT

• Self-Regulation:

___ **Self-Control** (I can keep disruptive emotions or impulses under control)

___ **Trustworthiness** (I'm known for honesty, integrity and keeping my promises)

___ **Conscientiousness** (I take on responsibility for and follow-through on my tasks)

___ **Adaptability** (I am flexible in adapting to change and unexpected obstacles)

• Motivation:

___ **Initiative** (I am always ready to act and to undertake new challenges)

EVALUATING YOUR SCORES

If your overall score is between 170 and 200, you are likely to be seen by others as savvy and self-aware, able to respond appropriately to most people and most situations.

If your score is between 140 and 170, your EQ is basically sound, but you may have some blind spots that could use some attention.

If your score is between 100 and 140, you may not be particularly socially adept or people-oriented, and others may see you as shy, aloof, rigid, insensitive, autonomous or inappropriate at times.

If your score is less than 100, there are marked deficits in your EQ which warrant attention if your career depends on getting on effectively with others.

Any specific competency with a score of 5 or less should lead you to ask if that competency is relevant to your job and work success. If the answer is "yes," some development of that competency is desirable.

Any specific competency with a score of 3 or less indicates a "hole" in your EQ that is likely to create some problems for you in some area of daily living.

3. SOCIAL AWARENESS

___ **Empathy** (I understand others' feelings and take active interest in their concerns)

___ **Organizational Savvy** (I understand and support the goals, dynamics, issues and politics within my organization)

___ **Service Orientation** (I recognize my colleagues' needs and strive hard to meet them)

4. SOCIAL SKILLS

• Leading Others:

___ **Leadership Effectiveness** (I am able to inspire, guide and align the efforts of others)

___ **Influencing Others** (I use effective/appropriate interpersonal behaviors and tactics)

8. Reassess Yourself, Recognize Progress and Reward Yourself, both formally and informally. Remember that you put yourself through all this work for a good reason.

Let's be honest: improving your EQ can be really hard work. You've had your present style and patterns for a long time, so don't expect them to give up without a fight. Expect relapses into old ways of thinking and behaving. The content of your self-development work is likely to vary enormously depending on the issues on which you're focusing. There are, however, some basic process tips that are valuable for almost all situations.

First, "*Push the Pause Button.*" By that I mean Stop! Slow down – your thinking, your assumptions and your actions! Inhale slowly for several seconds without talking. The purpose of this crucial step is to force yourself away from your "automatic" patterns of thinking and responding and to give yourself time to consciously focus your attention on what's going on at the moment.

Second, "*Name the Frame.*" This means taking a moment to inventory the factors, interests and elements of personal style that shape all parties' frame of reference: *What setting are we in? What are our respective responsibilities? What are our respective needs and expectations? What are the potential rewards and risks? What style am I using? What style are others using?*

Third, "*Reality-test Your Assumptions.*" Before you open your mouth, ask: *What exactly is going on here? Am I sure? What else might actually be going on here? Is there anything that would work better? What are the alternatives...really?*

Teaching yourself to re-examine your frame of reference is the crucial step for effective "re-framing," that is, adjusting your assumptions, attitudes, style and content to better fit a particular situation. Lawyers who are effective "situational leaders" do not bring a single style to all people and all situations; they learn to adjust their self-presentation to

enhance communication and collaboration – even if this is a bit uncomfortable for them. The trick, of course, is not to adjust your behavior so dramatically and so noticeably that you look artificial or manipulative. High-EQ people simply have mastered the technique of asking, over and over again, out loud and quietly to themselves: *What demeanor is most appropriate here? What behaviors are most effective in dealing with this particular person or situation?*

Demeanor means more than just choosing your words more carefully. It includes your posture, the volume and timbre of your voice, your ges-

"Lawyers who are effective 'situational leaders' do not bring a single style to all people and all situations..."

tures and body language, your eye contact – all the things that most people don't think about consciously. It's hard work to keep all these stylistic factors top-of-mind, but that's how you change, practice that change, internalize that change and eventually develop a more effective interpersonal repertoire. If you can do this once, you can do it repeatedly, constantly, consciously. The result: you have far greater control over how you come across to others, how you create relationships and deal with conflict. Once you're there, it feels great. ♦

1 Opening comments by Douglas B. Richardson as keynote speaker, NALP and ALI-ABA Professional Development Institute, Washington, D.C.; December 12, 2004.

2 Goleman, Daniel, Emotional Intelligence (Bantam Books, 1995).

3 Copyright 2004-2006 by Douglas B. Richardson.

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