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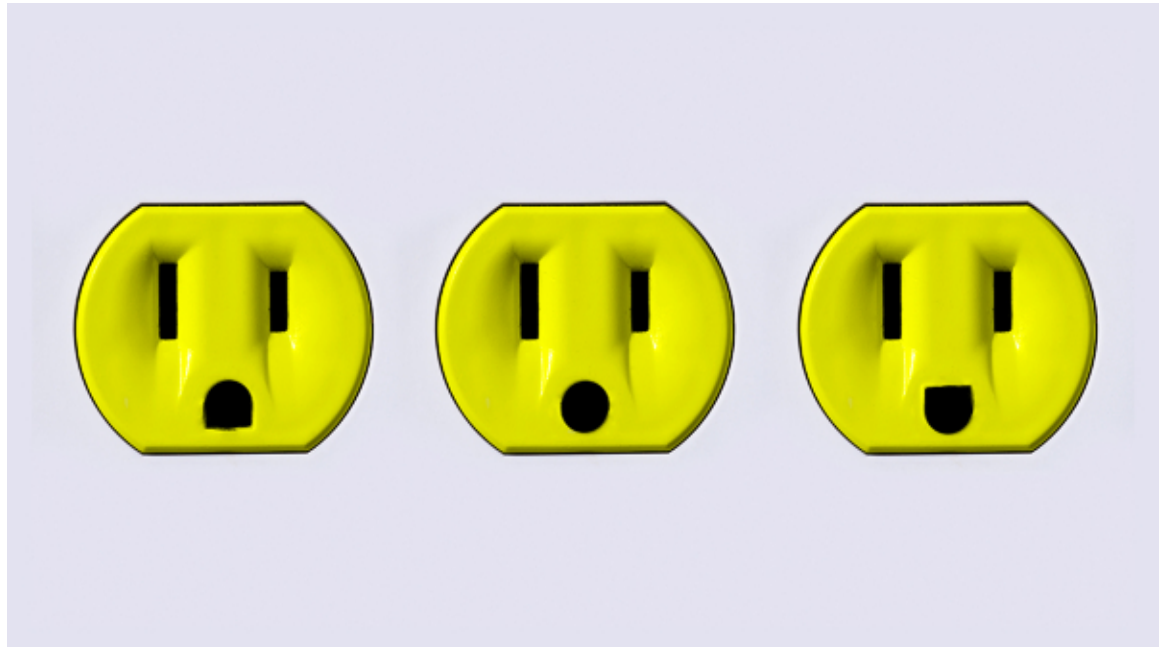
by Daniel Goleman and Michele Nevarez

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Boost Your Emotional Intelligence with These 3 Questions

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As the concept of emotional intelligence has gone global, we've watched professionals founder as they try to improve their emotional intelligence (or EI) because they either don't know where to focus their efforts or they haven't understood how to improve these skills on a practical level.

In our work consulting with companies and coaching leaders, we have found that if you're looking to develop particular EI strengths, it helps to consider areas for improvement *others* have identified

along with the goals *you* want to achieve — and then to actively build habits in those areas rather than simply relying on understanding them conceptually.

To that end, start by asking yourself three questions:

What are the differences between how you see yourself and how others see you?

The first step, as with all learning, is to get a sense of how your self-perception (how you see yourself) differs from your reputation (how others see you).

This is especially true for the development of emotional intelligence because we can be blind to, not to mention biased about, how we express and read the emotional components of our interactions. For example, most of us think that we're good listeners, but very often that's [really not the case](#). Without this external reality check, it will be difficult for you to identify the ways that your actions affect your performance. Getting feedback from others can also provide proof of the necessity of shifting our behaviors and an impetus to do so.

Furthermore, emotional intelligence can't be boiled down to a single score, as is done with IQ. You can't just say that you're "good" or "bad" at emotional intelligence. There are four separate aspects of it, and we're all better at some than others: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. (Within these domains nests a total of [12 learned and learnable competencies](#)).

To give you the best sense of where the differences lie between your self-perception and your reputation, then, you should use a 360-degree feedback assessment that takes into account the multiple facets of EI. We use the Emotional and Social Competency Index, or [ESCI-360](#) (a commercially available product one of us — Dan — developed with Richard Boyatzis of Case Western Reserve University and Korn Ferry's Hay Group), but many organizations have their own assessments. The key is to find one that guarantees confidentiality to those giving you feedback, that is focused on development and not on performance assessment (which skews the feedback), and that can give you a detailed sense of where others gauge you differently than you gauge yourself.

Another way to get an outside perspective on how your actions impact your relationships and your work is to work with a coach. A coach can help you delve under the surface and look at how your assumptions and personal narratives may be working against you. To find a well-trained coach, do your due diligence; coaching is not a licensed profession, so it is up to you to get references and to find out if a prospective coach has gone through a rigorous training program. If working with a coach is not feasible, find a learning partner instead, ideally a colleague whose opinions you trust and who would be willing to talk over how you are doing on a regular basis.

What matters to you?

When you get your feedback from an assessment or your coach, let that inform what you want to improve. But also consider what *your* goals are — how you want to get better at what you do now, or

where you want to go in the future. When it comes to cultivating strengths in emotional intelligence, you're at a huge disadvantage if you're only interested because a colleague, your boss, or someone in HR said you should be. Your emotional intelligence is so tied up in your sense of self that being intrinsically motivated to make the effort matters more when changing longstanding habits than it does when simply learning a skill like budgeting.

That means the areas that you choose to actively work on should lie at the intersection of the feedback you've gotten and the areas that are most important to your own aspirations. Ask yourself: Do you want to grow your capacity to take on a leadership position? Be a better team member? Exert greater positive influence? Get better at managing yourself, or keeping the goals that matter in focus? Or — your goals need not be only professional — do you want to have a better connection to your spouse or teenager? Understanding the impacts of your current EI habits relative to your goals will keep you going over the long haul as you do the work of strengthening your emotional intelligence.

For example, let's say you get feedback that you are not a great listener — but you think you are. Instead of taking this assessment as an attack, or simply dismissing it, step back and consider your goals: Perhaps you've said that you want to better connect, understand, and communicate with impact. How could listening well help you to do those things? Seeing the feedback in this light can help you position it as an opportunity for developing toward your goals, rather than a threat.

What changes will you make to achieve these goals?

Once you've determined which EI skills you want to focus on, identify specific actions that you'll take. If you're working on becoming a better listener, for example, you might decide that when you're conversing with someone you'll take the time to pause, listen to what they have to say, and check that you understand before you reply. Keep it specific. That helps you change the target habit.

You should also take every naturally occurring opportunity to practice the skill you're developing, no matter how small. You're trying to train your brain to react differently in common situations, and the principle of neuroplasticity tells us that as a given brain circuit gets used more often, the connections within it become stronger. And the brain does not distinguish between home and work when it comes to changing your habits: Practice at home as well as at work, with your partner or teenager as you would with your boss or direct reports.

Spotting these opportunities to trot out your new habit requires a bit of extra awareness. At first this will take effort (and actually doing it might feel strange). But each time you do it, these new pathways in your brain strengthen their connection, making your new approach easier and more habitual. Soon you'll find it more natural to pause and listen for a reply, for example, than to cut off the person you're talking with in your excitement to respond. One day you will reach a neural landmark: The new habit will kick in automatically, without you having to make any effort. That means your new habit has replaced the old as your brain's default circuit.

Here, too, a coach can be useful to you along the way, especially if they are explicitly trained in helping leaders and executives develop their EI strengths. From accessing the right kind of evaluation to observing you in action, a well-trained coach can work with you to identify personal narratives or habitual patterns of mind that undermine your ability to get out of your own way, and instead talk you through those days when life's pressures force you back into your old, not-so-good habits.

By answering these questions and starting to change your routine reactions, you'll be well on your way to figuring out the old habits that aren't serving you well and transforming them into new, improved ones that do.

Daniel Goleman, best known for his writing on emotional intelligence, is Co-Director of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University. His latest book is *Building Blocks of Emotional Intelligence*, a 12-primer set on each of the emotional intelligence competencies, and he offers training on the competencies through an online learning platform, *Emotional Intelligence Training Programs*. His other books include *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* and *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*.

Michele Nevarez, an executive coach and seasoned HR executive, heads leadership development at *Key Step Media* and directs the *Daniel Goleman Emotional Intelligence Training* programs and Coaching Certification. She is also an Adjunct Faculty Member for *Cultivating Well Being in the Workplace: A Neuroscientific Approach*, a program co-developed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business and the Center for Healthy Minds.
