

# The Conversation: Navigating the Nuances of Emotional Intelligence

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Ryan Jenkins, a Gen Z expert, recently called emotional intelligence the most “in-demand skill of the future.” He said, “The Industrial Revolution required muscle from its workers. The Information Age traded muscle for mental capacity, which explains the rise of “knowledge workers.” The future will require workers to be emotionally intelligent.”

With so much riding on this key skill, the sooner you can understand what it means to be emotionally intelligent, the more prepared you’ll be for workplace success.

[Sigal Barsade](#), Wharton’s Joseph Frank Bernstein Professor of Management, has long studied and taught emotional intelligence to students and top executives. She says: “Emotional intelligence is your ability to think intelligently about emotions and to use your emotions to think intelligently.”

## ‘A Sea of Emotion’

We called on [Maurice Schweitzer](#), Wharton’s Cecilia Yen Koo Professor of Operations, Information and Decisions and Professor of Management, to go a little deeper with how emotions make people better employees and business leaders.

Schweitzer’s research focuses on emotions and the negotiation process. Emotions, he says “drive so much behavior,” inspiring him to explore and write about topics like [Anger and Lying](#), [Anxiety and Advice](#), and how emotions [Influence How Much We Trust Other People](#). His recent research looks at how the fear of embarrassment changes the way we act, and not in a good way. “Once we appreciate that we’re constantly experiencing emotions that drive so many behaviors, it helps us understand the world around us and certainly a lot of business concepts,” says Schweitzer, who also taught last summer in our [Future of the Business World online course](#).

“Think about emotions as choices that you can make.” — Dr. Maurice Schweitzer, Wharton Professor

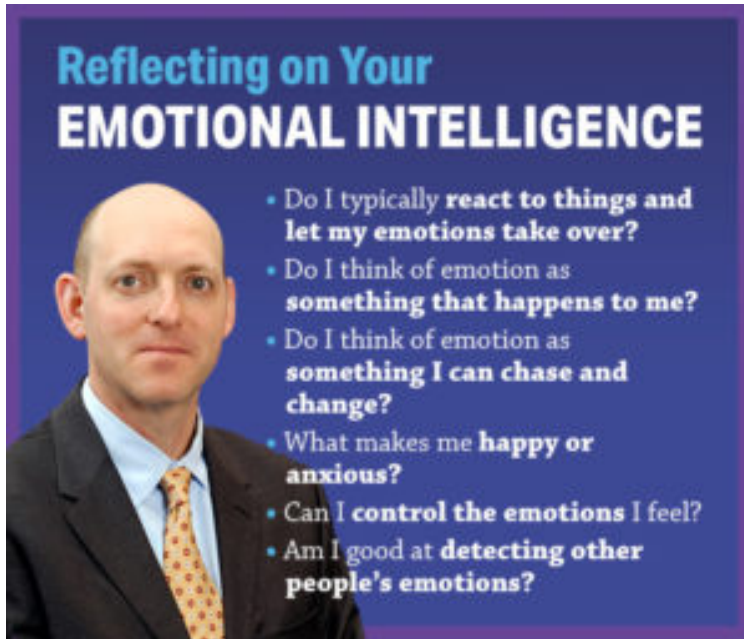
Emotional intelligence (also known as Emotional quotient or EQ), he says, has three main parts: the ability to recognize how you are feeling and how others are feeling; the ability to understand the triggers for those emotions in yourself and others; and the ability to change emotions, both in yourself through the choices you make, as well as by inspiring others to act a certain way (think of a great coach who leads his team to victory).

The connection between all of these is to acknowledge your emotions and the emotions of others – after all, emotion is what makes us human – and to realize your power over them. “We’re in a sea of emotion. Things are pushing us to feel one way or another constantly,” explains Schweitzer. “One thing is to recognize that the emotions shouldn’t be just pushing you around.”

As you think about becoming more emotionally intelligent, begin by looking inward, Schweitzer suggests. “Emotions change not just how you feel, but how you think and how you act. If you are happy, angry or sad, you will make different decisions,” he says. “When you’re emotionally intelligent, you first realize that you’re upset and agitated, for example. The next step is to realize what is making you agitated. Maybe it’s performing a certain task, or being with a person who is really critical, or listening to music that is changing how you’re feeling. Do a cognitive reappraisal and think about how you can change the way you feel. Then go ahead and take some action to change it. We can change our environment, we can change what we do, we can change where we go, and we can change how we think about things.”

## Perspective and Empathy

Emotionally intelligent people must also learn to look outward to assess the influence that emotion is having on others, both in leadership roles and as members of teams. Picture this: You had a chance to score a goal in the big game and you missed it. Your coach pulls you aside and yells at you. In business, this might be that your boss is really upset with you because you didn't land a big client.



Dr. Schweitzer suggests you start with these questions.

“When people express strong emotions, it’s natural for us to react,” says Schweitzer. “The emotionally intelligent reaction is to recognize it’s them, not you, and put it in perspective. [Rather than fall apart], think logically about the situation in a way that will ultimately change your emotion. Have the perspective to think that this isn’t really that big a deal and everything is going to be alright. By putting it in context, you can think about someone else’s emotional reaction and react to it differently. I feel badly they’re under so much stress to win games. Or, I wonder if there is a way to educate them or guide them to see a bigger picture and put things in a different perspective.”

An essential quality of outward emotional intelligence for business leaders is empathy. Empathy is the ability to communicate and lead by understanding others’ thoughts, views and feelings. Edward Yu, a former PwC executive, [talked with Knowledge@Wharton High School a few years back](#) about the power of empathy.

“To better understand empathy, think of the African word Sawubona, which means “I ‘see’ you,” said Yu. “When you meet somebody, you really see them — not just because you notice them, but because you respect them and understand where they come from.” The more you understand people on an emotional level, like your employees and co-workers, the more likely you will be able to draw out the best in their performance.

Tony Hayward is an example of a high-profile executive’s failure to empathize. Hayward was CEO of oil and energy company BP when the company accidentally spilled 4.9 million barrels of oil in the Gulf of Mexico during an explosion that also killed 11 people and injured 17. “When he delivered his apology, he said: ‘No one wants this over more than I do. I’d like my life back.’ He was pilloried for that,” notes Schweitzer. “It was self-focused, failing to appreciate the importance of emotions of others and those around him and how that was going to play out. He ended up losing his job.”

Whether aspiring to lead others or to be effective in any career position, success begins with your own emotional awareness. Ask questions and gather feedback from those around you, and observe how great leaders in your own life control and use their emotions.

“We can be deliberate about the kinds of experiences we seek out to improve our ability to recognize, use, and change emotions,” says Schweitzer. “Think about emotions as choices that you can make. Rather than letting the world change you, think about changing the world, whether it’s as small as changing how you’re thinking about something, going for a walk, going for a run, talking to a friend. Think about the choices you make as things that are going to change how you feel.”