

The Emotionally Intelligent Project Team

We are all emotional beings and we tend to think, speak and act from an emotional base. We cannot go to work and leave our emotions at home. The project environment is inherently uncertain and pressures will almost certainly arise that stimulate the full range of emotions. How then do we manage emotions in the project environment so that they contribute to project success? If there were such a thing as an emotionally intelligent project team, then how would it behave and what would it look like? Most importantly, how is such a team established, developed and maintained?

Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is credited with being the most essential competency of any top performers in any field of endeavour. Daniel Goleman, the author of the book 'Emotional Intelligence', claims that it is 85% of what sets top performers apart. He also claims that studies show that a project team with a leader with a high EI performs 20% above other teams.

Goleman defines EI as *“the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships”*. The higher level competencies identified as comprising EI include the 'personal' competencies of Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation and Motivation. The 'social competencies' are Empathy and Social Skills¹.

In my experience, emotions at work, particularly in a project environment, are not well managed. Traditional management practices emphasise logical thinking and non-emotional activities. If people are to behave in a business-like and professional manner, there appears to be an expectation that emotions should be excluded or at the least, under strict control. Some emotions such as enthusiasm and happiness beaming through the customer service smile are encouraged, but fears, concerns, sadness, and other seemingly negative emotions are non-rational and appear too difficult to deal with. However, if they can at least be acknowledged and accepted as a part of the project environment, then the door is open to developing ways of better dealing with emotions and perhaps even using them as an ingredient for project success.



This paper briefly describes the Druskat and Wolff definition and model for group emotional intelligence and illustrates the model through an example of how it can be applied in the project environment.

Group Emotional Intelligence

Druskat and Wolff, in their chapter on ‘Group Emotional Intelligence’ in the edited studies in the book ‘The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace’, give a well researched description of the cultural norms established by emotionally intelligent groups. Their aim is to have the group achieve cooperation and collaboration, which are the fundamental interaction processes and ingredients for work group effectiveness. Druskat and Wolff believe that cooperation and collaboration are built on trust, group identity and group efficacy and they have therefore developed their definition of group emotional intelligence using these terms. Their definition is: *“the ability of the group to generate a shared set of norms that manage the emotional process in a way that builds trust, group identity and group efficacy”*²



The dimensions of Group EI and the norms that have been identified are shown in Figure 1.

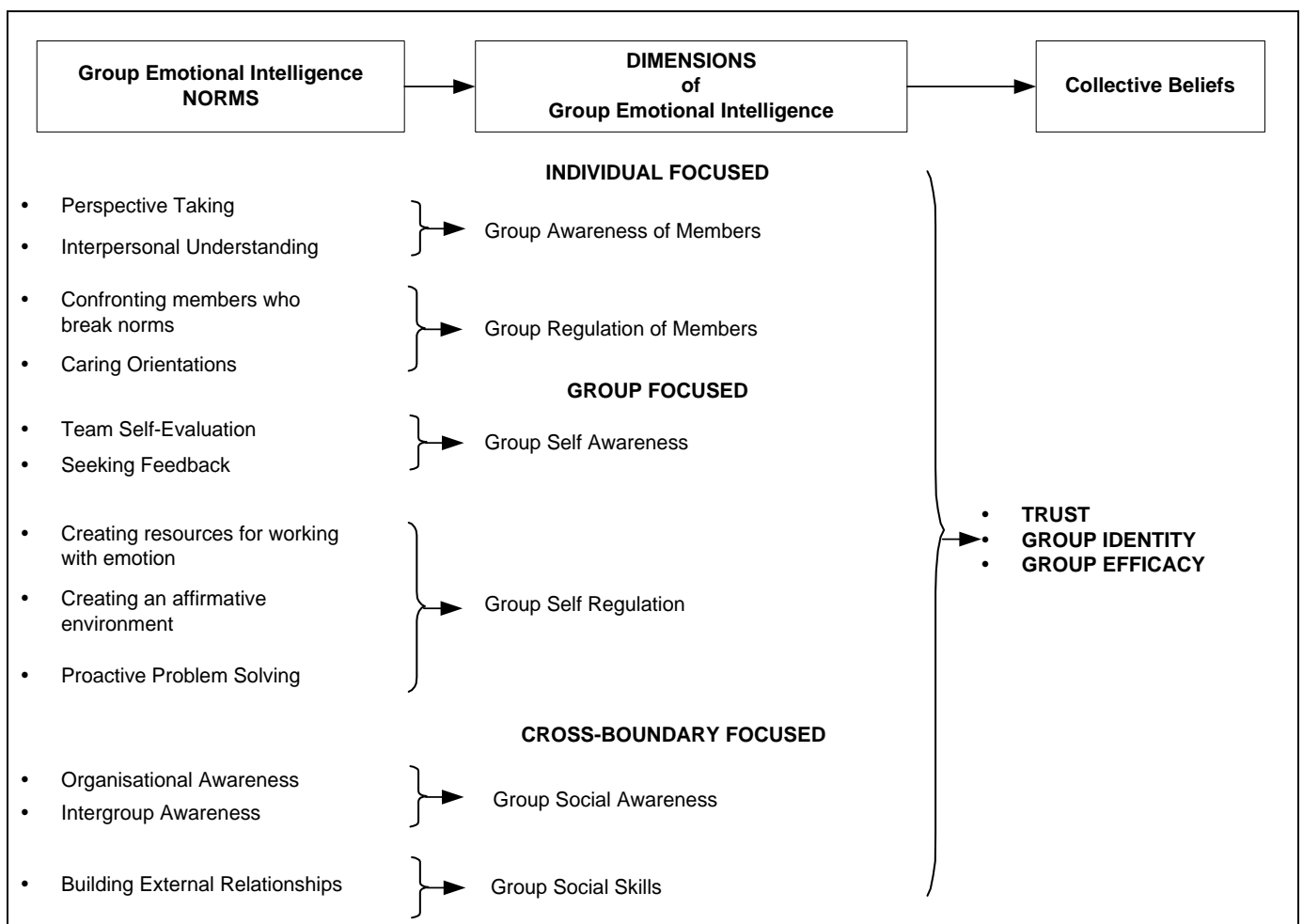


Figure 1 – Dimensions of Group Emotional Intelligence

A Project Story

While most readers would be able to identify with some of the norms shown in Figure 1 and could illustrate them from their own experience, the question arises as to how these norms are established, developed and maintained. In a paper of this length, a little 'story telling' may be more useful than a detailed examination of each of the norms.

Individual Focused

When the contract was won and negotiations were all but complete, the Project Manager (PM) called his team of principal managers together for the official project launch briefing. There were 12 members of the team covering all areas of the project including project coordination, engineering design, test engineering, mechanical engineering, software engineering, quality, procurement, production, installation/implementation, training, documentation, and logistic support. When all of the mandatory elements of the project briefing had been covered, the PM asked each member of the team to consider two groups of questions for discussion the next morning:

- From your perspective and project experience, what are the things that worry you or keep you awake at night? What has been done on other projects that you do not want to happen on this one? How would you like this project experience to be different?
- As the life cycle of the project progresses, your part in the project will become the primary focus. What members of the team do you expect to receive the work from and how do you expect it to come to you? Who will you pass the work on to and what should they expect from you?

The team then proceeded to a social function comprising a few drinks and dinner. There was some lively discussion around the table and some interesting and entertaining story telling of both good and bad project experiences.

The next morning the team assembled for a four hour round table meeting. In introducing each member of the team, the PM acknowledged each person's project experience, their contribution to past projects and the significance of their contribution to this project. The PM also ensured that each team member was acknowledged as the 'single point of authority' for his or her particular area of responsibility. Each person was given the opportunity to answer the questions and speak from their perspective. Each member of the team listened quietly and attentively. There were short periods of discussion between speakers where there was a general agreement on the values that the team would adopt. They included what the team did not want to see and, more importantly, a consensus was achieved on what they did want.

Each member felt heard and understood by the rest of the team. The meeting had started slowly but it soon became more lively and positive. There was a general commitment to being open, honest and communicative about how they were feeling about any potential risks. Emotions were expressed and heard. Concerns around how the team would deal with other internal and external stakeholders were expressed, and a positive attitude was developed as to how they would be dealt with.

The PM facilitated the meeting and summarised for the team, the positive vision of how they would operate, deal with conflict, and handle errors. The PM also made it clear that they may need to be reminded from time to time of the agreements made at the meeting and to expect that reminder from the PM or other team members. The PM emphasised that the agreed policy was to confront issues

quickly and face-to-face before they could gather any momentum. The approach would always aim to be positive and focus on what corrective action was required rather than looking at the past to find who was at fault.

By the end of the meeting there was a general feeling of commitment by team members to support each other and the team as a whole. A positive vision of the team and its ability to achieve the project objectives was established. Importantly, there was an enthusiasm and determination to do things differently and have fun in the process.

The first important steps in the *Group Awareness of Members* through *perspective taking* and gaining an *interpersonal understanding* were quickly achieved. A *caring orientation* was established through the expression of a positive regard, appreciation and respect by the PM as each member was introduced, which seemed to be taken up by members of the team in addressing each other. Members of the team were left in no doubt that it was every team members responsibility to confront issues and conflict quickly to achieve a positive way ahead – criticism was unacceptable if it was anything other than constructive and positive. A basis for *confronting members who break norms* and *Group Regulation of Members* had been set.

Group Focused

The project commenced and the team soon became focused on its first major milestone. Although the milestone required some concentrated effort, the PM and the team believed that it could be achieved without major risk. When the team achieved the milestone, the success of the principal individuals involved, and indeed the whole team, was widely publicised throughout the company and to stakeholders outside of the company. The always difficult ‘ramp up’ period of the project was successfully completed. The team felt very good about itself and proudly wore their project tee shirts as a badge. Those members of the company who had some part to play in the project but were not members of the core team sent requests to the project for their project tee shirt justifying their involvement. It did not take long before most of the support and services members of the company identified themselves with this successful team. Morale was high and there was a feeling that no one wanted to let the team down.

Project status meetings always included a short review of how the team was progressing and team members were encouraged to offer suggestions of how the team might improve by comparing itself to other teams. *Team self-evaluation* became a regular feature for review. The PM and the team actively *sought feedback* from functional managers and others and listened carefully to all comments whether good or bad. The team used any criticism as a means to improve their performance. Positive feedback was publicized throughout the wider team. The pride and esteem of the team continued to rise and the PM began receiving requests from some members of the company to join the project. *The team became self-aware.*

Project status meetings did not spend much time on the details of cost and schedule performance. The reports spoke for themselves. Each team member was asked to comment on their achievements and the potential risks that concerned them. How team members felt about their achievements or the potential risks was encouraged so that the whole team had the opportunity to provide constructive suggestions and support. Team members expressed their fears, disappointments, stresses and difficulties, and felt free to ask for whatever support they needed from any other members of the team. The team became comfortable in *working with emotion.*

The PM was an optimist and was good at verbally painting a positive picture of both the project achievements and its future. The PM *created an affirmative environment.* The team also became

increasingly focused *on proactive problem solving* and looked on every issue or risk as a challenge and opportunity rather than an obstacle.

Cross-Boundary Focused

The PM and individual team members worked to achieve *organisational awareness* through understanding the influences exerted by organisations or individuals external to the project. Some effort was invested in **inter-group awareness** by understanding the culture, the expectations and needs of other groups and project teams in the company.

Briefings of the project team by external groups impacting the project were used as a means of initially developing *external relationships*. In much the same way as the initial project team meeting was held, the project team listened carefully to the external groups perspective and needs. The team became increasingly aware of the need to foster individual and team relationships in order to ensure that it could secure the resources it required. These reciprocal briefings and informal lunches provided a means to establish an agreement about how the project and the external group would interact and what processes they would follow.

The project team took every formal and informal opportunity to keep others informed of the project. The project team, as well as individual team members, became increasingly skilled at keeping all levels of the organisation informed about project achievements and progress as well as the support required for future activities. Members of the team spoke highly of each other and openly acknowledged the support provided to the team by all stakeholders. The team had developed sound *group social skills*.

The project team never failed to meet its project milestones and the wider project team seemed to include most other members of the company, the client organisation and other major stakeholders. Everyone wanted to identify with this positive, enthusiastic, happy, successful and emotionally intelligent project team.

A Fairy Tale?

This story may seem a little fanciful or idealistic to some readers. However, the story is based on the actual experience of the author in managing such a project team.

Notes:

1. Daniel Goleman, 'Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ', Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996
2. Vanessa Urch Druskat and Steven B. Wolff, 'Group Emotional Intelligence and Its Influence On Group Effectiveness' Chapter 6 in the book 'The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace' edited by Cary Cherniss and Daniel Goleman, Published by Jossey-Bass, 2001

About the Author

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