

The Real Definition of Smart

It is an odd experiment: A group of executives is asked one by one to lie in an MRI machine and perform a variety of mental tasks. Picture one of these executives inside the coffin-like apparatus, amid loud banging sounds, while scientists scan their brain.

Because of such work, and a series of other studies, the idea of pinpointing high-performance leadership is no longer quite the guesswork it once was. We've all had bosses in our careers who had an uncanny ability to energize

us, move us to the next level. And then we got stuck with ones who did just the opposite. Now science can tell us why—and document the growing importance of emotional intelligence.

This kind of intelligence differs from IQ, with a different set of abilities that make or break the best leaders. In a study of mine of more than 100 different businesses and other organizations, we found that purely cognitive abilities like IQ were merely a “threshold” competence, one you needed to get the job. But once you were in the game, you were competing with people about as smart as you are—what’s technically known as a “floor effect,” which makes IQ smarts less predictive of performance than it is in the general population, say, among students.

The distinguishing abilities that related most strongly with outstanding job performance for each company were far more often in the emotional intelligence category.

This sort of intelligence reflects how people handle themselves—for example, striving toward a goal, staying calm under pressure—or how they manage relationships, like inspiring others to give their best or working as a team player.

Empathy, the ability to sense the views and feelings of others, operates as a keystone in one’s ability to manage relationships, ensuring that what a leader does and says will resonate with everyone else in a positive way. But beyond empathy, many of the best leaders have strength in a closely related competence: They can inspire their people to give their best, to feel pride and loyalty in their organization or team, and to love what they do. This is no idle theory: Brain studies suggest the power of leadership resonance to inspire.

As reported in the *Leadership Quarterly*, a handful of senior executives and business owners had their brains scanned during different mental

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tasks. In one trial they vividly recalled how they felt during a specific encounter with a leader they had developed a resonant relationship with—for example, a time when that leader kept them focused on a positive goal or offered meaningful support. In another trial they brought to mind the opposite sort of encounter, a toxic interaction with a dissonant leader—the kind who was harshly and unfairly critical or created needless stress.

Importantly, scientists find that what we feel when we vividly remember a charged incident reflects fairly accurately what we felt at the time. And the scans revealed a stark difference between the brain circuitry activated by resonate versus dissonant interactions.

When recalling a memory of the resonant encounter, the executives’ brains reflected a pattern suggesting positive feelings and emotional engagement. In contrast, recollections of the dissonant interaction activated areas reflective of avoiding something unpleasant by withdrawal into an inward focus of attention, along with caring less about others—in fact, an active disliking.

This pilot study was done by Richard Boyatzis of the Weatherhead School of Management

at Case Western Reserve University, working with a team from the imaging sciences unit at Cleveland Clinic.

“The quality of a leader’s relationship with his or her followers,” the report notes, “affects the follower’s job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover retention, health, effort, learning and development—as well as the leader’s ability to effectively renew his or her own energy and motivate others.”

Likewise, at the Yale School of Management,

research on leaders and their teams showed this from another angle. When team leaders were in a bad mood, team members caught that mood, and performance dropped. When leaders felt enthusiastic and energized, members did too, and performance was high.

How can an executive create resonance that leads to these benefits throughout an organization? One suggestion: Go to scale with a healthy dose of emotional intelligence. ●

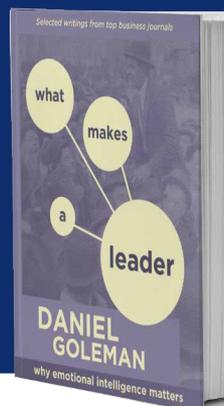
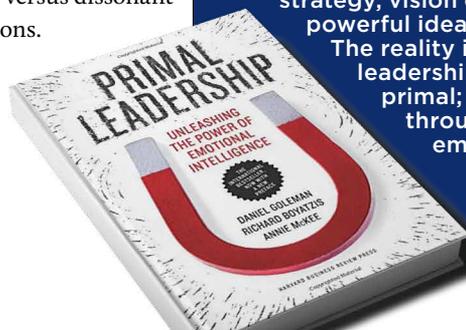
READING ROOM

Primal Leadership: Unleashing The Power of Emotional Intelligence

(Harvard Business School Press)

Great leaders move us, but it is not only about strategy, vision or powerful ideas.

The reality is that leadership is more primal; it works through the emotions.



What Makes A Leader: Why Emotional Intelligence Matters

(MoreThanSound)

Research shows that when it comes to top echelon leaders, companies find that 80-90% of the competencies that distinguish star leaders are built on emotional intelligence.