



# Enhancing decisions and decision-making processes through the application of emotional intelligence skills

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Little research has been contributed to how the behaviors associated with emotional intelligence may be practically applied to enhance both individual and group decision-making. The purpose of this paper is to identify practical approaches to the application of emotional intelligence to the decision-making process. These practical approaches are designed to instruct and aid decision makers in the utilization of emotional intelligence skills to improve decision-making.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Goleman's and Boyatzis *et al.*'s four essential elements of emotional intelligence and their associated 20 behavioral competencies are utilized to develop a methodology for the practical application of emotional intelligence skills to decision-making. A series of questions and observations are outlined to assist decision makers in the improvement of emotional intelligence awareness, as well as the utilization of emotional intelligence skills to enhance decision-making processes.

**Findings** – Organizations and individuals may benefit from the development and utilization of behaviors attributed to emotional intelligence. The practical application of emotional intelligence skills can enhance individual and group decisions and outcomes.

**Originality/value** – The practical application of emotional intelligence skills becomes a strategy for the development of the individual's and organization's ability to assess the impact and consequences of decisions, while simultaneously improving the quality and effectiveness of the decision-making process.

**Keywords** Decision making, Emotional intelligence

**Paper type** General review

## Introduction

Milkman *et al.* (2008) noted in the knowledge-based economy, a knowledge worker's primary deliverable is a good decision. The ability of organizations, corporations and entities to contemplate, evaluate and implement quality decisions is dependent upon a multitude of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. While the management of extrinsic variables may be more difficult to control, the identification and management of human variables such as emotion and logic are pivotal in the effort to increase the quality of decisions and decision-making processes. Researchers have recently focused attention on the impact of some of the human emotion variables on decision making. Hilary and Hui (2008) found that both individuals and organizations exhibiting a high



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degree of religiosity display lower levels of risk exposure in decision making. Similarly, Fernando and Jackson (2006) noted that in the individuals studied, outcomes of difficult decisions, both good and bad, were in some way attributable to a religious, spiritual or value characteristic.

One of the most fascinating dichotomies in contemporary thought surrounding decision-making is the apparent conflict between the roles of emotion and rationality. Stanovich and West (2000) divided cognitive functions between those that were faster, effortless, implicit and emotional as compared to those that were slower, conscious, explicit and logical. The authors believed better decisions could be derived by shifting decision-makers from intuitive and emotional thinking to logical and rational thinking. Moreover, the authors concluded replacing intuition with more intensive data collection and analytical processes enabled the decision-maker to construct linear models to produce relevant predictors. The suggestion here is that human beings will make better decisions if we transform our cognitive functions to resemble those of an emotion-free microprocessor.

There is an alternate research process proceeding in artificial intelligence to inject learned emotions into microprocessor driven decision-making. IBM is developing a cognitive computing processor to emulate the patterns of human thinking (Bai, 2008). Additionally, the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory has developed an artificially intelligent machine that has defined elements of sensory and emotional systems (Velasquez, 1998). The computerized platform is capable of modeling six different emotions for decision-making: anger, fear, distress/sadness, joy/happiness, disgust and surprise. Velasquez's premise based upon previous work (Damasio, 1994) is that intuition and emotions play crucial roles in the ability to make smart, rational decisions.

Thus the ironic dichotomy of current thought is that some researchers believe human beings will make better decisions when emotions are removed, and the mind is bent to perform more like a data-analyzing machine. Concomitantly, some researchers contend data-analyzing machines will make better decisions when they are capable of utilizing intuition and emotions. So who is right? We believe both are fundamentally correct. Further we have concluded that consistent with Simon's (1967, 1971) notion that emotion and rationality are inextricably linked, emotional intelligence can serve as the necessary bridge between the two. Moreover, the behaviors most often identified with emotional intelligence may be learned and applied in a practical manner to improve the overall quality of decisions and decision-making processes.

### **Purpose of paper**

Emotional intelligence has been the subject of a significant amount of literature over the past two decades, ranging from debate over whether emotional intelligence is innate or learned, to the categorization of specific behaviors that define emotional intelligence. However, little has been contributed to how the behaviors associated with emotional intelligence may be practically applied to enhance both individual and group decision-making. The purpose of this paper is to review relevant emotional intelligence literature and to identify practical approaches to the application of emotional intelligence skills to the decision-making process.

### Relevant emotional intelligence research

The definition of emotional intelligence and the context in which the term should be used has been a matter of debate in the literature over a number of years (Mayer *et al.*, 2008). Thorndike (1920) first coined the term “social intelligence” to describe the skills utilized in understanding and managing people. Later in 1940 Wechsler (Bar-On, 2006) noted the influence of other factors on intelligent behavior and posited that models of intelligence could not be complete until those factors were more fully understood. The term “emotional intelligence” was first used in the USA in a doctoral dissertation studying the acknowledgement and effects of emotion (Payne, 1983). This work was followed by an emotional intelligence model described by Salovey and Mayer (1990), articulating emotions could enhance rationality and that individuals would be better served to work with, rather than against, their emotions. Bradberry and Greaves (2003) noted emotional intelligence skills, when considered cumulatively, were vital in representing mental and behavioral functions of individuals beyond their native intelligence.

The bulk of the literature in emotional intelligence may be encapsulated in the description of three models: ability model; trait model; and mixed model. The ability model as described by Salovey and Grewal (2005) posited that individuals have varied abilities to process and react to emotional circumstances and as a result develop adaptive behaviors to deal with social situations. The trait model proposed by Petrides *et al.* (2007) was based upon the premise emotional intelligence represents a cluster of self-perceptions operating at the lower levels of personality. This focus on behavioral dispositions relied heavily on self-measurement and as such was more resistant to scientific calibration (Petrides *et al.*, 2007). The mixed model was best characterized by Goleman’s (1995) description of emotional intelligence as a wide array of competencies and skills driving leadership performance. Goleman’s model was based on the premise emotional competencies are not innate traits, but rather learned skills that may be developed and improved.

In a follow-up study Goleman (1998) noted the very best corporate leaders, while diverse in their leadership styles, share in common the characteristics of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill. These skills according to Goleman allow superb leaders to understand their own as well as others’ emotional makeup well enough to move people to accomplish institutional objectives. Goleman’s (1995) original work on emotional intelligence described the following essential elements or abilities: knowing one’s emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; and handling relationships. Goleman’s theory of emotional intelligence and its characteristic behaviors has been further refined to include both individual and organizational behaviors and outcomes. The more fully developed emotional intelligence model as described by Goleman (2001) and Boyatzis *et al.* (2000) refined the original five elements into four dimensions and further subdivided these characteristics into 20 behavioral competencies as outlined in Table I.

The domain of emotional intelligence has benefited from more recent literature in the leadership and group dynamics disciplines. Taylor *et al.* (2008) noted both aspiring and established leaders in the organizations they studied agreed the behaviors associated with emotional intelligence were characteristics of effective leaders and critical to the future success of aspiring leaders. The authors noted an additional

function in established leaders described as organizational altruism or more specifically defined as an understanding of the institution and dedication to the institution's success. Wang and Haung (2009) found that emotional intelligence and group cohesiveness were positively associated with transformational leadership. In detailing the relevance and efficacy of emotional intelligence, Antonakis *et al.* (2009) concluded relationship approaches to leadership were inherently emotional, making emotional intelligence an integral part of the leadership process. Similarly, Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) argued leader/member exchange relationship quality was enhanced through emotional intelligence of leaders, and Zhou and George (2003) concluded emotional intelligence can enhance leadership within team settings.

Addressing the role of emotional intelligence in decision-making processes, Sevdalis *et al.* (2007) noted that although empirical research has emphasized the relevance of emotions in decision-making processes, individual differences in the perception and experience of emotion have been largely overlooked. The authors concluded when people make decisions, they often think about the emotions the outcomes are likely to trigger. Further, Sevdalis *et al.* (2007) outlined decision-makers:

- anticipate their emotions before a decision materializes;
- experience them when they receive the outcomes of their decision; and
- recall them from memory when they contemplate past decisions (good or poor).

Mellers *et al.* (1999) concluded emotions people expect to experience or have experienced as a result of their decisions are important determinants of their current and future behavior. Winter and Kuiper (1997) noted individuals differ in systematic ways in how they experience emotions, how they differentiate among emotions and how much emotional information they can process.

The literature also suggests a differentiation in the effectiveness of emotional intelligence between individual and group tasks. Jordan and Troth (2004) found that while no link between emotional intelligence and performance existed at the individual level when the task being performed was purely cognitive in nature, the same task transferred to a team setting introduced an emotional element requiring emotional intelligence skills. More specifically the authors concluded a team's overall level of emotional intelligence and the ability of team members to deal with their own emotions impacted performance. Druskat and Wolff (2001) and Jordan *et al.* (2002) noted that

| Self awareness           | Social awareness         | Self-management   | Relationship management     |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Emotional self-awareness | Empathy                  | Self control      | Developing others           |
| Accurate self-assessment | Service orientation      | Trustworthiness   | Influence                   |
|                          | Organizational awareness | Conscientiousness | Communication               |
|                          | Empathy                  | Adaptability      | Conflict management         |
|                          |                          | Achievement drive | Leadership                  |
|                          |                          | Initiative        | Change catalyst             |
|                          |                          |                   | Building bonds and teamwork |
|                          |                          |                   | Collaboration               |

**Table I.**  
Dimensions of emotional intelligence and associated behavioral competencies

Source: Goleman (2001); Boyatzis *et al.* (2000)

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teams comprised of members with higher levels of emotional intelligence will perform better on tasks than teams comprised of members exhibiting lower levels of emotional intelligence.

### **Applying emotional intelligence skills to decision-making**

While much of the literature has focused on the theoretical aspects of emotional intelligence, a significant gap exists in the practical application of these skills to decision-making. If one believes emotional intelligence adds value to the individual and/or group decision-making process, the question arises how can it be practically applied to achieve that desired result? Decision makers are often faced with problems that cannot be easily solved and in some cases have negative impacts on some constituency even when they have been declared solved. Thus the consideration of the effect of decisions on others should be an important element of the decision-making process. While determining “who” will be affected by decisions may be a more pragmatic function requiring rationality and logic, determining “how” the decision will be interpreted and its subsequent effect on others requires the skills associated with emotional intelligence.

The practical application of the ability model described by Salovey and Grewal (2005) necessitates the exercise of the following skills: perceiving emotions; using emotions; understanding emotions; and managing emotions. In the decision-making process, the acknowledgment of individual emotions is critical in determining not only the motivations behind decisions but also the impact of those decisions on others. Decision makers who understand the emotions of others may utilize that perceptivity to head off potential negative outcomes by addressing those emotional issues in advance of the decision (Huy, 1999). Likewise, decision makers who perceive and understand their own emotions will be much more effective in managing those emotions in the decision-making process. In keeping with the four elements described by Goleman (2001) and Boyatzis *et al.* (2000), the emotional intelligence skills in decision making may be categorized as those more related to the individual, self-awareness and self-management, and those more attributable to the individual’s relationship and interaction with others, social awareness and relationship management.

### **Self-awareness and self-management ... evaluating the role and motivations of the decision maker**

Self-awareness and its representative competencies of accurate self-assessment and self-confidence (Table I) enable emotionally intelligent decision-makers to determine their appropriate role in the decision-making process (Goleman, 2001; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000). Specifically, these skills enable decision makers to determine if they have the requisite orientation to a problem and have enough self-confidence to assess their own decision-making skills in comparison to others. Accordingly, these emotional intelligence skills create a decision path to determine who is the most appropriate person or group to make the best decision in any given circumstance. Without emotional intelligence, decision makers fail the first and most important decision, which is “who is the best decision-maker for this decision?”

Self-management and its behavioral components of self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, achievement drive and initiative (Table I) are equally

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important emotional intelligence skills for decision-makers (Goleman, 2001; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000). Lerner and Shonk (2010) documented the effects of residual anger on decision-making, noting that decision-makers who were held accountable for their decisions were better at managing the effects of their anger. Controlling the impulse to make every decision individually can sometimes fly in the face of the need to show initiative and achievement (Bazerman and Malhorta, 2006). Additionally, in order for decision makers to gain moral authority on an issue, they must first be viewed as trustworthy by those affected by a decision. Trust is earned over time through a process of openness and honesty in both communications and relationships. Decision-makers can utilize self-management skills to establish a consistent record of achievement and emotional control, while simultaneously earning trust from both internal and external constituents.

In settings where the speed at which technical issues can be resolved or new products, applications or solutions can be made available is highly valued, the temptation is to avoid decision-making processes that occupy valuable time. However, the emotionally intelligent manager will evaluate the consequences of losing trust among workers and teams when speed wins out over participation (Bazerman and Malhorta, 2006). Suppressing the need for personal achievement and relying on adaptability, the emotionally intelligent manager will assess the best decision-making process for each circumstance and be conscientious in engaging the appropriate individuals and groups. Time spent on developing the right decision-making process will pay large dividends in both the quality of solutions, as well as the level of acceptance and trust gained.

#### *Application of self-awareness and self-management skills*

Applying the skills of self-awareness and self-management to decision-making situations is a process that can be learned. The following questions and observations can serve as a practical guide for individuals and organizational leaders in decision-making circumstances:

- Are decision makers aware of their decision-making skills and styles? Is there a tendency to reach first for the emotional elements of a decision circumstance, or conversely, to reach for the rational analysis components? Emotionally intelligent decision makers will make an honest self-assessment of skills and styles, noting the differences in their behaviors and abilities as compared to others.
- Would others describe decision makers as inclusive or exclusive in decision-making processes? The leadership and decision-making styles as described by Vroom and Yetton (1973) are useful here. The authors described a range of behaviors beginning with the pure autocratic style, to partial inclusion and pure delegation. While decision makers may view themselves as more democratic or participatory, the more critical aspect is the perception of others. While it may not be appropriate to be inclusive in every decision, the emotional intelligence function suggests it is important to communicate to others when and why inclusive or exclusive methodologies are utilized.
- Are decision makers confident in their decision-making skills? Tsai and Young (2009) concluded that fear makes individuals second-guess themselves and abandon support for efforts that have gone even slightly off track. Emotionally

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intelligent decision makers must exude confidence in their decision-making style. Being self aware also implies acknowledging one's weaknesses and having the confidence to recognize the strengths of others in decision-making. Self awareness also includes the skill of recognizing the impact of one's styles and behaviors on others.

- Are decision makers merely focused on their own interests or are they truly interested in achieving the best decision results? Emotionally intelligent decision makers are characterized by their ability to suppress their own desires and interests for the common good.
- Are decision makers overly focused on the desire for a speedy result? Bazerman and Malhorta (2006) noted that time pressures often lead decision makers to bad judgments. Patience is pivotal in achieving the desired decision outcome.
- How can a decision-making process be utilized to build trust, not only for decision makers, but also among all the appropriate constituents? Mayer and Caruso (2002) noted that leaders high in emotional intelligence will build real social fabric within an organization, as well as between the organization and those it serves. Interpreted in the decision making environment, this social fabric is best described as furthering and honoring the culture of the organization. Accordingly, emotionally intelligent decisions are those that are grounded in the culture of the organization.
- Are decision makers willing to adapt to new decision-making processes rather than relying upon the entrenched processes of the past? When the need for a new decision-making process arises, those who can self manage and correct course will earn the trust of those involved in the process. The honest acknowledgement of a need to break with the practices of the past is critical to building self confidence, as well as developing the relationships necessary to affect a positive decision result (Huy, 1999).
- Are decision makers willing to quickly admit to and correct misjudgments? The ability to openly admit to mistakes is important to both self-management and relationship management. Mistakes make emotionally intelligent human beings stronger and give them the opportunity to truly connect with others in honesty and humility.
- Are decision makers willing to appropriately delegate decision-making authority? Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) developed a continuum of control and decision-making shared between leaders and followers. At all points on their continuum both the leader and the followers have some control. The amount of control each party has depends on the amount that the followers are able to assume. The leader begins with most of the control over decision-making and gradually passes this over to the followers, as they develop their capability, commitment and maturity.
- Are decision makers willing to accept the consequences of having delegated or shared the decision-making authority? When decision-making is delegated and things go wrong, the true test of emotional intelligence arises. The emotional intelligence skill applied here is for both the person delegating the decision and the decision maker to acknowledge and learn from the mistake. Additionally,

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emotionally intelligent decision makers share credit for good decisions and accept responsibility for bad decisions even though they may not have agreed with the decision.

### **Social awareness and relationship management . . . assessing and managing the decision-making environment**

The emotional intelligence skill of social awareness and its core competencies of empathy, service orientation and organizational awareness (Table I) enable decision-makers to judge the impact of not only their decisions but also the manner in which those decisions are made (Goleman, 2001; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000). The best decisions are those that can be understood and accepted by the individuals most affected by the decision. Whether they are individuals or groups, decision-makers who practice the value of empathy can foresee the impact of their decisions before implementation (Goleman, 2001). Likewise, exhibiting a servant philosophy can improve the quality of decisions. For example, if decision makers view those affected by decisions as customers who may be retained or lost, they may be more likely to consider the outcomes and consequences of decisions (Miller, 2009). Accordingly, decisions considered in the context of service outcomes, as well as customer satisfaction and retention, are more likely to be understood and more easily defended within the organization. Finally, being aware of the organization's culture will enable decision-makers to make more rational judgments in decisions, as well as the processes by which the decisions are made.

As noted previously in Table I, the emotional intelligence skill of relationship management includes the behavioral competencies of developing others, influence, communications, conflict management, leadership, change catalyst, building bonds and teamwork (Goleman, 2001; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000). The enhancement of decision-making processes is dependent upon the ability to effectively communicate desired outcomes, influence stakeholders and manage conflict. In both individual and group decision-making processes, the ability to manage relationships is pivotal to success. Even the best of decisions can have negative results if not properly communicated, including the proper articulation of decision-making processes.

While most would like to believe the decision to affect change is most often arrived at through a rational, logical process that is not always the case. Indeed the implementation of many desired changes is fraught with potential conflict, regardless of the original intent of the change. The ability to manage that conflict is central to both the process and outcome of decisions, requiring decision-makers to exercise emotional skills while simultaneously attempting to steer necessary changes.

#### *Application of social awareness and relationship management skills*

In assessing and developing social awareness and relationship management skills, decision makers might consider the following questions and practical observations to enhance decision-making:

- What individuals, groups or constituents will be most affected by the decision? Social awareness implies decision makers have adequately contemplated the impact and consequences of a decision before it is made. This emotional intelligence skill requires decision makers to play out scenarios of decisions to determine both their short and long-term consequences and effects (Huy, 1999).



- How should those impacted by the decision be involved in the decision-making process? Those impacted by a decision will perceive the change more positively if they are involved in the decision-making process. This involvement may range from active participation in the contemplation of decision options to commenting before a decision is finalized.
- What decision-making processes are most appropriate given the culture of the organization? Being socially aware requires decision makers to assess the culture of the organization to determine appropriate actions. For example, if the culture of the organization is team oriented and participatory in nature, it would be important to design decision-making processes consistent with that culture.
- How will the decision and decision-making process be viewed in retrospect? Emotionally intelligent decision-making requires looking forward and backward simultaneously. Viewing actions from a historical perspective enables decision makers to assess the impact of current decisions through the eyes of constituents. Reliving past decisions through the lens of their impact also assists emotionally intelligent decision makers in playing out the future of current contemplated actions.
- Are decisions viewed as a means of developing or furthering relationships with those with whom decision makers work? Relationships are based upon communication and trust, and emotionally intelligent individuals view every decision-making circumstance as an opportunity to develop or improve the relationship with others.
- How do decision makers communicate with others engaged in the decision-making process? This aspect of relationship management requires a regular and consistent method of communication that reinforces the role of each person in the decision-making process. When a decision has been delegated it remains critical to support that delegation in all communications.
- What are the decision maker's attributes in managing conflict? Emotional intelligence is exhibited in conflict settings by seeking first to understand the position and feelings of the other person (Mayer and Caruso, 2002). Thus in circumstances of conflict, emotionally intelligent decision makers listen more than they speak and seek opportunities to learn the opinions of others. Being direct about conflicting views is important to demonstrate honesty, and exhibiting compassion in moments of tension develops the trust necessary to foster long-term relationships. Additionally, the emotionally intelligent response in moments of conflict requires an examination of one's own emotions. It is only possible to exhibit self-control if one understands the origins of experienced emotions. Emotionally intelligent decision makers manage volatility by expressing compassion while exhibiting and furthering the culture of the organization in the decision-making process (Huy, 1999).

### **Conclusions**

Every individual and organization shares the goal of enhancing the quality of decision-making, and the application of emotional intelligence skills can assist in the attainment of that goal. Decision makers who are self-aware and can accurately and honestly assess their strengths in comparison to others in the organization have the

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advantage of leveraging the attributes of others in the decision-making process. The ability to assess the potential emotional outcomes and reactions of decisions can empower decision makers to predict the sentiment of those affected by decisions, thereby increasing the probability of a more positive decision outcome. The process of building and maintaining relationships is inherently human and requires an emotional perspective and while time consuming, will generate better decision outcomes. Additionally, decisions worth making often generate conflict, and the ability to manage that conflict involves an emotional intelligence skill that can determine the ultimate success of the decision-making process. Finally, the practical application of emotional intelligence skills and behaviors can enhance not only the outcome of a decision but also the processes associated with decision-making.

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