How Emotional Intelligence Can Make You Better In 2011

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

For many of us, 2011 began with a promise—a promise that this year we would accomplish that which has eluded us. Often it’s the everyday things that prove most difficult—managing your schedule, treating people the way you ought to, and keeping things in perspective when chaos is at hand. The sad truth is that nearly 80% of us will fall off the resolution bandwagon by Super Bowl Sunday; and by this time next year, a mere 5% of us will have succeeded in reaching our goals.

There are two reasons why we’re so bad at reaching our resolutions. The first is that we bite off more than we can chew. It may seem reasonable to pick up three or four new skills to add to your repertoire, but that’s an expectation the mind can’t execute. When we try to develop too many new skills at once, they become competing priorities that leave us distracted, discouraged, and overwhelmed. The second reason most self-improvement efforts are doomed to fail is that our emotions have a nasty habit of hijacking our behavior. Without a strong ability to recognize and manage our emotions as they occur, old habits are sure to die hard.

The good news is that you can address both problems and make the changes you desire by resolving this year to develop a single skill—emotional intelligence (EQ). Piles of research over the last two decades has shown that emotional intelligence is likely the single most powerful success factor yet discovered—affecting everything from job performance and annual income to mood and satisfaction in life.

We’ve tested emotional intelligence alongside 33 other critical skills and found that it subsumes the majority of them, including time management, decision-making, and communication. It’s no wonder that emotional intelligence is responsible for 58% of performance in all types of jobs and is the single greatest driver of leadership and personal excellence.

But how does emotional intelligence play such a large role in so many important skills? Emotions are the root of all human behavior. Whether we’re aware of it or not, the motivation behind every action (no matter how small) is inherently emotional. As you master emotional intelligence, you master the ability to understand and control the motivations for your behavior. Working to improve your emotional intelligence increases your abilities in a host of other important skills because EQ gets right to the heart of the matter. Emotional intelligence is powerful and efficient—it allows you to focus your energy in a single direction for tremendous results.

The five skills that follow illustrate some of the tremendous gains you can realize solely by increasing your emotional intelligence.
1. Time Management—Preserving Your Most Precious Resource

In this age of abundance, time is the one thing nobody has enough of. Perhaps that’s why Google receives 111 million searches a month for *Time Management*. Few people recognize the degree to which time management depends upon the emotional intelligence skills of self-management and relationship management. Creating a good schedule is a very rational thing, but sticking to that schedule is decidedly emotional. Many of us start out every day with the best intentions to manage our time wisely. But then we receive a complicated email from a co-worker, a consuming phone call from a friend, or otherwise get sidetracked until our well-laid plans go up in flames. We spend the rest of the day trying to put out somebody else’s fire, or working to resolve issues that weren’t there in the morning. Before you know it, the day is gone and you’re completely off schedule. When the distractions are your own, sticking to a schedule requires self-management. When the needs of others try to impede upon your plans, it takes a great deal of social awareness and relationship management to finesse the relationship while ensuring that your priorities are still addressed.

2. Change Tolerance—Remaining Flexible in the Face of the Only Guarantee in Life

Show me somebody who claims to love change, and I’ll show you a well-intentioned liar. Change is uncomfortable for everyone at times, and for many of us, makes our skin crawl every time. Those who apply well-honed self-awareness and self-management skills tolerate change much more successfully than others. Self-awareness enables you to adjust comfortably to change because it gives you the perspective needed to realize when change is coming and when change is getting the better of you. Self-management keeps you cool in the moment—often with a reminder that even the most stable, trusted facets of your life are not completely under your control. Those most averse to change, who possess great self-awareness and self-management skills, even set aside a small amount of time each week to list possible changes and what actions they can take in response.

3. Presentation Skills—Knock Your Audience Dead with Positive Self Talk

Few things strike primal fear in the heart of the average person like standing in the spotlight in a room full of people (Your heart just sped up, didn’t it?). Even the most eloquent among us can be reduced to a spewer of verbal garbage once the sheer anxiety of public speaking takes hold. That’s why a knock-em-dead presenter’s most inspiring presentation is often the one she delivers to herself. A bit of positive self-talk—reminding herself of all the times she has succeeded and how qualified she is to speak on the topic—enables the effective speaker to use her performance anxiety to sharpen her focus and make her more articulate. If you think that’s silly, then you probably haven’t tried it. Emotional intelligence doesn’t just make you aware of your emotions, it equips you with strategies for keeping them from holding you back.

4. Decision Making—How Emotions Make Rational Decisions

It has taken the world far too long to wake up to the fact that emotions simply cannot—and should not—be ignored when making decisions. Neuroscience now shows us that...
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sometimes the most rational thing you can do is trust your emotions when making a decision. But in order to make this work, you have to be aware of the emotions you’re feeling, why you’re having them, and how they factor in to the situation at hand. Here, there is no substitute for the core emotional intelligence skills of self-awareness and self-management.

5. Assertiveness—Mastering the Art of Letting ‘Em Have it

Emotional intelligence is commonly mistaken as a synonym for “nice.” In fact, the most emotionally intelligent response is often one where you directly and openly express your emotions. To paraphrase Aristotle, getting angry is easy. Getting angry with the right person, at the right time, and to the right degree requires emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence doesn’t allow lashing out, nor making yourself into someone else’s doormat. To be assertive, you have to know what you’re feeling (self-awareness), read the other party accurately (social awareness), and express yourself in a way that garners the best result (self-management and relationship management). People with high EQs do this naturally.  

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of Emotional Intelligence 2.0 and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world’s leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, Newsweek, BusinessWeek, Fortune, Forbes, Fast Company, Inc., USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and The Harvard Business Review.