



# 7 Practices of EI Leaders: lifting your leadership to the next level

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on excerpts drawn from our self-coaching guide on  
Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence © Bill Cropper 2004-15

In an EI workshop I ran a while back, John, a senior project manager, said he had an open-door policy with his staff. Other participants gleamed at him admiringly. “Yes,” he confirmed, “my people can come talk over anything anytime with me, except...” he hesitated, “...if it’s got to do with feelings. Then, I’m straight out of there.”

More recently, I facilitated a meeting of operational managers, where one of them summed up his feelings about feelings: “I focus on results and outcomes around here. Emotions don’t come into it. I keep my feelings to myself and I expect my staff to keep emotions out of it too, and just focus on what they’ve got to do.”

While it’s widely recognised that EI is central to good leadership, good teams, good relationships and good work, this kind of ‘feeling-phobia’ is not isolated, at least in my experience. Many leaders pay EI lip-service but in practice they ignore it, or take the stance that workplaces should be rational and emotion-free. Not much hope of that! But it’s still a prevalent belief amongst many managers I meet.

Of course feelings can’t be ignored. They’re the backdrop to everything leaders do. There’s nothing that doesn’t hark back to feelings in some way. When you boil it down, leadership is emotional. It’s implied in every action leaders take. Great leaders move us. They inspire, motivate, influence, connect. These are all emotional effects. They’re passionate, driven, focused, persistent, positive – more emotional qualities.

Endless research says the higher you climb on the career ladder, the more EI matters if you want to lift your leadership to the next level. Self-control, exercising wisdom, judgement, decisiveness, discretion or determination in navigating subtle social politics of organisational relationships, are all hallmarks of successful leaders. EI underpins all these by strengthening a leader’s capacity to be more mindful, self-aware, approachable, connective, positive, resilient, supportive and inspiring.

## 7 Practices of EI Leaders...

So it looks like leadership success isn’t just built on technical know-how, smart strategy, sound project management, financial smarts or how hard, decisive and driven you are. It’s built on firm EI foundations too. EI is a distinguishing factor that often seems to set successful leaders apart from the rest. To put it bluntly, being smart-enough just isn’t good enough to lead well anymore – if it ever was. EI is not just a fringe activity or an optional extra – it’s a critical competency for all capable leaders.

So what does an EI Leader look like, and what do I need to be doing to become one?

In our *Leading with EI* programs, I introduce people to *The 7 Practices of EI Leaders*. They form the framework for how I structure my EI workshops.

The *Practices* don't purport to be all-encompassing or comprehensive. They evolved from workshops, coaching conversations and personal experiences people shared with me, about what actions and choices seem to enhance a leader's ability to leverage emotions positively for getting better outcomes and bringing out the best in themselves and the people they lead.

So here's a summary of the 7 Practices. You might like to test them against your own experience. For example:

- Are there instances in my leadership experience that confirm or contradict this practice?
- What aspects of my leadership style and behaviour already reflect this practice?
- What aspects of my leadership style and behaviour seem at odds with this practice?
- What would you need to stop/start doing to be a more emotionally intelligent leader?



### The 1<sup>st</sup> PRACTICE: Authenticity – I express my feelings...

EI Leadership starts with knowing yourself. This is the Practice of *emotional self-awareness*. EI Leaders are authentic, direct, honest – they don't delude themselves about their feelings. They know them *and* control them. They're in close touch with their emotional patterns and how these affect their own actions and behaviour, as well as others around them. They say what they feel clearly and cleanly, without blaming others. They also recognise how important it is that they, as leaders, model being open about feelings and the role they play in good work relationships, so others in their teams feel safe to do so too.

- Being a leader, staff want to know how you feel about various issues. If you keep feelings to yourself, withhold or act withdrawn, this sets off their trust alarms. They'll see you as distant, cold, insensitive, unsupportive, unapproachable – and your ability to lead is diminished. You're not being authentic.
- We don't trust people who mask their true feelings. If leaders hold back, staff wonder why. If you don't tell them what you feel, they'll simply make up your feelings for you. In contrast, EI Leaders have the courage to say what they feel genuinely. This builds trust and makes them approachable.

By the way, when we say EI Leaders express their feelings, we don't mean *every* feeling *all* the time. Considering we have thousands of feelings a day, that would be exhausting and totally time-consuming. Think of expressing feelings *strategically*, feelings about things that matter to you or others at work – a cancelled budget or program, a major change or relocation, unruly behaviour, poor performance or moments of pride, fun, celebration and achievement.



### The 2<sup>nd</sup> PRACTICE: Connectivity – I connect with other's feelings...

EI Leaders are connective. This is what makes them approachable. Even in difficult situations, when hard messages have to be delivered, they stay connected with other's feelings and keep one eye on the relationship. They can

read and respond to other people’s feelings with sensitivity, authenticity, respect and care. They use empathy to build and maintain relationships and handle tricky team moments. This empathetic connection is what enables them to keep in touch with what others are thinking and feeling.

- ❑ Connectivity is a basic precondition for almost anything else leaders want to do with people. Without connecting first, they can’t persuade, influence, inspire or motivate. If you want people to take committed action and put in a good performance, you have to connect with their feelings first.
- ❑ EI Leaders are able to get in tune, or ‘resonate’ with, the moods and emotional currents in their teams, then act in ways that are emotionally effective to bring out their best, help them bounce back after set-backs, help them to refocus or stay on track.

Conversations are how EI Leaders exercise connectivity. EI has a lot to do with the way we talk to each other and how we come across, and EI Leaders always have time to have connective conversations with others. This builds respect and mutual positive regard. It sets the tone of your workplace, and creates cultures that support ‘good work’.



### The 3rd PRACTICE: Relationships – I build and maintain positive links...

EI Leaders know they get things done through others. They place a premium value on relationships, and on developing positive links. They offer encouragement and support without being asked, look for opportunities to be of service to their teams, and play the role of networker and team facilitator. As Daniel Goleman says, *“Managing relationships skilfully, boils down to handling other people’s emotions.”* Some relationships are resonant. Others are dissonant. EI Leaders seem able to work a bit of emotional alchemy even in teams where things are tense, uneasy, troubled or anxious.

- ❑ Having constructive relations with people you lead is really a no-brainer. When people feel good, they work better. You don’t need elaborate research to conclude people are more willing to put effort and energy into work when they feel connected and have good relationships with their leader.
- ❑ This means making connections with people at a personal level, not treating them as just positions or bundles of skills to do your bidding. It means getting to know what matters to them, how they like to be treated, learning a bit about their family, aspirations, life-stories and ambitions.

This is also the Practice that’s concerned with EI at a team level – what we refer to as SETI (*Social and Emotional Team Intelligence*). It’s one of the key differentials between effective teams and ineffective ones, and a really key element may be whether people have good feelings about the team they work in. An EI Leader skilled in creating good feelings can keep cooperation high. On the other hand, behind a team where there’s a high level of emotional tension and discomfort, is often a lack of EI skills.



### The 4<sup>th</sup> PRACTICE: Mood Maintenance – I manage my moods...

Because they’re in close touch with feelings, EI Leaders can manage their moods and control disruptive emotions. They’re aware of their feelings in the moment and are mindful in situations that are likely to emotionally hijack them. They’re careful to maintain emotional balance and regularly self-reflect on events that destabilise them, or lead them to behave in ways that are unconstructive for them and their teams. As well as managing your own emotions, this Practice also deals with how EI Leaders handle and contain disruptive emotions in other people too.

- ❑ ‘Managing moods’ means being alert to how disruptive emotions affect your behaviour, learning to regulate our emotions, curb impulses to say and do things that damage others, persist in the face of setbacks and sidestep being hijacked by moods, paralysed by pressure or swept away by anger.

- This is a basic EI discipline. Self-regulation enables us to focus and be *present*. Lack of emotional self-control is a major hurdle to leadership success. Those who get extremely angry and berate others do not make good leaders. Neither do those who are pessimistic or who fall to pieces under pressure.

This Practice is also about coming to terms with your personal levels of positivity or pessimism: how well leaders handle stress, contend with hostility and a host of other emotions that upset workplace balance, and build resilience in the face of set-backs.



### The 5th PRACTICE: Meaning-Making – I help others make meaning...

EI Leaders play a key role as meaning-makers and perspective-takers. They help team members make sense of things that go on in their work-lives – whether it's clarifying feelings, unpacking an issue, conveying why something is important, or helping people step back and see what's going on in the big picture.

They're also aware that clear goals and shared visions are major motivational contributors to good moods and good work, and they constantly work on inspiring and engaging their team through these.

- Mental Models are the medium EI Leaders use for 'meaning-making' – our mindsets, values, beliefs, and storied assumptions. They influence the way we think, feel, decide and act. Differences in mental models are a major barrier to building shared meaning and common understanding in workplaces.
- Because mental models shape the values we hold and how we see various situations and events, EI Leaders are constantly alert to the messages and meanings circulating in their culture, and work at changing or mediating ones that are emotionally dysfunctional, toxic or counter-productive.

As well as helping people share perspectives and make their mental models visible to each other, this Practice also overlaps into the realm of Systems Thinking. EI Leaders help their people to see beyond superficial causes to deeper, multi-causal patterns; to challenge linear thinking, current mental models and approaches, and see deeper interconnections and relationships between things.



### The 6<sup>th</sup> PRACTICE: Curiosity not control – I am curious, not judging...

EI Leaders realise that being critical and judgemental does not motivate people, and creates unsafe emotional climates. Rather than blame, criticise, judge or offer harsh comments, they learn to adopt a stance of curiosity tempered with compassion and understanding. Faced by challenging behaviour or 'problematic' people, EI Leaders remain balanced and even-minded. They wonder what's going on

for others, how they can understand or help, rather than act out of a space of condemnation, criticism or control. Curiosity – the ability to put aside your story and want to know more about theirs – allows you to connect.

- Many of us don't see how our need to control, correct or castigate curtails curiosity. If we play judge, comparing their 'wrong' behaviour to our 'right' behaviour, we're after a conviction, not connection. At times, we all need to curb the tendency to be overly-critical rather than accepting and supportive.
- Connecting calls on leaders to listen empathetically. It takes tolerance, openness, concentration and mindfulness. It asks us to listen to really understand – to put aside our views and imagine what it's like for them; to suspend value judgements and be more concerned about them than about yourself.

EI Leaders know that coaching, a leadership style that naturally stems from curiosity, is better than command and control. Curiosity is also a precursor to being compassionate, our 7<sup>th</sup> and final Practice.

## The 7th PRACTICE: Compassion – I'm caring, tolerant and understanding...



We define compassion as “*caring enough to emotionally identify with the plight of others and want to do something about it*”. Most managers are conditioned to lead with head, not heart; to put business before benevolence. We convince ourselves we can't make space for compassion or connection. Yet that's exactly what EI Leaders do make time for. Because they empathise and connect, they can instill hope, optimism and energy in others. This takes compassion. In fact, connectivity (2<sup>nd</sup> Practice) and compassion coincide – and compassion is often described as ‘empathy in action’.

- ❑ Compassion is selfless. You put others' needs before yours and don't expect anything back in return. Benevolent action is key. Compassion isn't passive. It means acting charitably on those feelings. It's also unconditional. You act compassionate regardless of how others are toward you.
- ❑ Compassion isn't just about being benevolent to others. It's also helps us stay emotionally balanced, builds up our reserves of resilience, insulates us from harmful effects of toxic emotions, and can act as a stress-reliever. It also helps channel our focus away from negative sentiments that drain energy.

Compassion can also lead to more connectivity in workplaces, thus creating safer and more supportive emotional climates, where people can perform better. Since emotions are contagious, the calmness that comes with leaders taking a compassionate stance, can also spread to others around them.

### Leading with Feelings

How well leaders work with feelings not only has a direct effect on results and performance – developing emotional talents like perseverance, resilience, mindfulness, compassion and connectivity are critical for both work and life success. Skills like these are essential for happy, productive workplaces. When they're not there, we notice. Lack of EI costs but rarely gets noticed on the bottom-line balance sheet.

Work or home, EI is the most enriching life-skill anyone can learn – whether it's building great teams, being a more mindful, connective or compassionate leader, boosting morale and performance, or creating awesome workplaces where we get on well, have fun and produce amazing results. The ability to connect with others is what matters most and makes the difference in so many leadership arenas.

Our 2-day ***Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence*** program, and 1-day fast-track ***The Emotionally Intelligent Leader***, are powerful, practical learning events, where I explore the crucial components for leader-success and provide lots of tools and insights into how to apply *The 7 Practices of EI Leaders* to master the things that matter most to lead well, manage emotions more mindfully, create more connective cultures and bring out the best in you and others..

---

More on *Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence* and our other emotional intelligence and conversational coaching programs on-line at [www.thechangeforum.com](http://www.thechangeforum.com).

- Review our on-line **Course Calendar** for up-coming dates and events in your area
- Download free **FactFiles** or back-issues of our **CC E-News** e-zine for background reading and tips
- Download our **Directory of Programs** for outlines of the full range of programs we offer
- **Contact us** anytime to **enquire** about in-house programs or our general consulting services

**BILL CROPPER** – Director, The Change Forum  
 Tel: +61-(0)7-4068 7591 Mob: +61-(0)429-687 513  
 Email: [billc@thechangeforum.com](mailto:billc@thechangeforum.com) [in](#) [t](#)