

Emotional intelligence is key to success

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“All learning has an emotional base.”

—Plato

“Intellectual ability” is an important factor in predicting a lawyer’s success in practice. Recent studies, however, have shown that a resume packed with a stellar grade point average and law review experience is not entirely indicative of the capacity to practice law or even generate business. Rather, character, leadership, ability to relate to others and attitude—attributes that are indicative of the capabilities generally identified as “emotional intelligence”—are equally important. After all, most lawyers have IQs that allow them to graduate law school and pass the bar exam. Likewise, it is the experience you acquire during the first years of practice that will ultimately matter much more to your career than the ability to craft an essay as a 20-something law student. Given this basic level playing field in intellectual ability, the emotionally intelligent lawyer is more likely to achieve professional success than one who has less understanding of, and control over, emotions.

Following a pattern set by the business world for more than a decade, law firms have begun to view the emotionally intelligent candidate, clerk, associate or partner with increasing favor. In acknowledging the importance of emotional intelligence in the internal process of recruiting and hiring associates and ultimately advancing junior and senior associates to partner status, these firms have not become “weak” but, rather, “wise.” This article will explain why by providing a primer on the practical definition of emotional intelligence, and then introduce examples of how lawyers can use the psychological processes associated with emotional intelligence to develop as professionals.

What is emotional intelligence?

Emotional intelligence—first introduced by Edward Thorndike in 1920, defined by Peter Salovey and John Mayer in a series of papers published in the early 1990s, and popularized by Daniel Goleman in three best-selling texts published throughout the past decade—describes an “ability, capacity, or skill to perceive, assess, and manage the emotions of one’s self, of others, and of groups.” In its basic form, this school of thought holds that traditional cognitive intelligence alone cannot ensure success at work and in life. Rather, those who ultimately succeed are in control and command of their emotions, restrain negative emotions such as anger and doubt, and focus on positive feelings such as optimism and confidence.

While competing interpretations exist—Salovey and Mayer, for instance, frame the concept as intelligence in the traditional sense and other theorists place it in the context of personality theory—Goleman’s definition, which formulates emotional intelligence in terms of performance, is the most popularly accepted today. Specifically, Goleman groups emotional intelligence into four clusters of psychological skills: self-awareness, self-management, awareness of others and social skills. Self-awareness implies an

awareness of what one feels in certain situations and includes self-confidence and selfassessment of strengths and limitations. Self-management identifies distressing emotional effects and includes self-control, adaptability and the ability to prevent emotional impulses. Awareness of others is how one deals with others and includes service orientation, organizational awareness and an understanding of the effect that words or actions will have on someone else. Social skills builds on these three categories and embodies one's ability to sustain a quality relationship including leadership, communication and the ability to influence others so as to preserve a relationship. The difficulty lies in applying this technical psychological framework in a practical manner to our performance as attorneys in various practices of law.

Using emotional intelligence to improve our professional development

Becoming leaders in the profession

By mastering the psychological skills set forth by Goleman, we enhance our ability to lead and positively impact how clients, juries, judges, colleagues, opposing counsel, etc., view us. Those who acquire leadership positions in firms often achieve them for reasons other than their ability to lead—they have extra time, bill the most hours or are simply the most senior. None of these reasons, however, necessarily relate to the actual ability to lead. The emotionally intelligent attorney can fill this gap.

First, observe recognized leaders in the profession and emulate the behavior that makes them successful (awareness of others). Second, determine those skills that will be most helpful in responding to the likes and dislikes of your clients and superiors in the firm, and then prioritize these competencies accordingly (self-awareness and selfmanagement). Finally, consciously develop these skills and participate in community service, networking activities and other efforts that allow us to interact with peers on a professional and personal basis (social skills). By developing the ability to lead, we can begin to use emotional intelligence to manage our negative emotions and ultimately improve our work performance.

Dealing with negative emotions to improve performance

Fear, anxiety and anger operate as a double-edged sword. On one hand, they motivate us to work harder and succeed. On the other, they can cripple our efforts to perform. As is often the case, we experience insults, unfair practices and obstacles that interfere with achievement of our goals. In the high-stress environment of law firms, these challenges can disrupt our ability to not only lead, but also to perform. Because it is necessary for lawyers, especially those in leadership positions, to tolerate ambiguity and handle risk taking, a strong grasp on emotional intelligence can not only help us, but also empower us, to deal with fear, anxiety and anger, and turn them into positive emotions. Again using Goleman's framework of psychological skills, we can become aware of the conditions that trigger these emotions, manage ourselves to best respond to these conditions and ultimately develop a long-term plan for a constructive resolution. It is the attorney that most effectively manages stress, and responds to fear, anxiety and anger—not necessarily the one with the strongest grasp of the rules of evidence or legal

technicalities—that can ultimately navigate through the many challenges and obstacles that a law career presents. The emotionally intelligent lawyer knows how to deal with unruly partners, colleagues and clients, accepts constructive criticism and overcomes such worries as “will I make partner?”

Pleasing the client and generating business

Service to clients is at the core of the practice of law. A lawyer’s ability to communicate and relate to others—social skills in Goleman’s paradigm—plays an important role in his or her practice. While strong work product and results are certainly important to satisfying a client’s business needs, an emotionally intelligent lawyer who can effectively communicate with, relate to and understand the client may be the key to pleasing the client and earning or retaining that client’s business in the first place. Today, competition for new clients in the Cleveland market, for example, is as intense as ever. Any comparative competitive advantage can help sustain and grow business as law firms continually adapt their business development strategies to what works. We serve people, and accordingly, need people skills to be successful. For example, take rainmakers who are able to bring in new clients with their charisma, likability and trustworthiness—all characteristics indicative of emotional intelligence—rather than their law school class rank. Ultimately, the law encounters emotion at all turns. From divorce to employment discrimination, alternative dispute resolution to trusts and estates, the law deals with emotion at some basic level. It is drafted by legislators and enforced by judges and jurors, who, being human, react to matters before them in a very human way. We can thus train ourselves to become active listeners and more empathetic counselors—skills that will enable us to best understand, communicate with and respond to our clients.

Start hiring emotionally intelligent associates

Law firms must now take the initiative to recruit and hire emotionally intelligent associates. While the best and brightest candidates should still be hired, an understanding that intellectual ability is not the only criteria for true “brightness” is essential to the hiring process. Accordingly, hiring partners should train interviewers to observe emotional intelligence and how candidates behave in certain scenarios. The results could be given as much weight as grades, law review and moot court experience. Psychologists have developed objective tests to measure this behavior. These tests include the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, a measure involving a series of emotion based problem solving items; the Emotional Quotient Inventory, a self-report examination designed to measure a number of constructs related to emotional intelligence; and the Emotional Competence Inventory, a feedback tool where the score is a reflection of feedback from management, peers and underling employees. These formal examinations simply measure behavior, personality and attitude, and, now that we can define it, emotional intelligence. Businesses have long used behavioral-based