

JULY 2022

Remote and In Touch: Cultivating Emotional Intelligence in the Leaders of a Hybrid Tomorrow

An increase of research into how emotions impact the workforce, particularly into the role empathy plays when it comes to managing risk, combined with the rapid shift in workplace norms driven by the pandemic, is driving interest in emotional intelligence (EI) as a necessary leadership skill. Empathy is a critical trait in modern leadership due in part to the increasing use of teams, the rapid pace of globalization, and the growing need to retain talent. Emotional culture is shaped by how all employees conduct themselves, but it is up to senior leaders to determine which emotions will help the organization thrive, subsequently model those emotions, and then reward others for doing the same. RANE spoke to **Dr. George Vellios, Managing Partner at Straxo, Dr. Christine Allen, Vice President and Workplace Psychologist/Executive Coach at Insight Business Works, and Dr. Caterina Bulgarella, Co-Founder & CEO at Be Thread** to better understand the business case for cultivating EI in leaders, explore the consequences of not practicing emotionally intelligent skills, and provide suggestions for how to develop these traits.

WHAT TO KNOW

Emotional intelligence (EI) is, according to psychologist Daniel Goleman, a group of five skills that enable the best leaders to maximize both their own performance, as well as that of those they manage. EI skills are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. While everyone is born with certain dispositional traits, some of which make it easier to demonstrate attributes of EI, people can strengthen these abilities through persistence, practice, and feedback. But building one's EI cannot happen without desire and effort.

While EI is not a new concept, says RANE expert **George Vellios**, Managing Partner at Straxo, within the last five to seven years there has been a tremendous spike in interest from clients, and EI assessments have become the most in-demand assessment his firm does. As discussions of mental health have become more common and socially acceptable in the workplace over the last couple of years, leaders with EI are in even greater demand because those with an understanding of EI have a better ability to recognize the role and impact emotions play within the workforce.

RANE expert **Caterina Bulgarella**, co-founder & CEO of Be Thread, explains the spike in interest in EI as the convergence of four trends. The first is the proliferation of research into pop culture, beginning with the publication of Daniel Goleman's book on EI, which made a splash in 1995. Since then, research into emotions in the workplace has only increased, especially with regard to the "social contagion" phenomenon (how the emotions of leaders affect the people around them) and the role empathy plays when it comes to managing risk and creating a more ethical culture. "So we know more and that knowledge is informing how we design practices, how we design systems, and how we think about leadership," **Bulgarella** says.

The second trend is the changing demography of the workforce. Older generations are leaving in droves, in part driven by the pandemic, and the workforce is increasingly composed of younger workers who are much more comfortable acting on what they feel. Leaders now have to manage a fundamentally different cohort of people, for whom emotions deeply matter.

At the same time, the workplace, itself, is changing. Operating in a hybrid or remote

setting has a significant impact on emotions and emotions well-being. Workers have limited — and in some cases no — access to behavioral cues, are spending more time alone, and/or are exposed to extraneous emotions from shared-space home environments, which can affect their job performance.

The final trend is that how we think about leadership is changing. According to **Bulgarella**, “If you look at the typical EI model, there are two components in that model —motivation and social skills— that have always defined leaders. We imagine leaders as extroverted and assertive. There’s a quality to leadership, often cultivated in business schools, that is seen as traditionally masculine and gregarious. But there’s been a quiet revolution, and I think with the workforce changing, with the workplace evolving, and with all of us being on the cusp of big social changes, the way we are thinking about leadership is also changing.” “EI, with its focus on self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, helps us think about leadership in a more complex way,” she says.

WHAT TO THINK ABOUT

The mental health-related challenges and so-called “Great Resignation” that have resulted from the pandemic provide a crucial opportunity for corporate leaders to better understand how “soft skills are the hard skills” and that these skills are key to successful engagement with a business’s stakeholders, says RANE expert **Chris Allen**, Vice President and Workplace Psychologist/Executive Coach at Insight Business Works.

Although executives face some constraints since scientific research strongly suggests that there is a genetic component to EI, many psychological and developmental findings have shown that EI can be nurtured and reinforced. **Allen** agrees, observing that while some personalities have innate tendencies towards EI, like any skill, it can be practiced and learned. She says that even if empathy isn’t a skill someone has naturally,

people can practice empathy by routinely asking questions like “What’s going on with you? What’s on your mind? How are you feeling?”

Bulgarella recommends thinking about EI as a practice, rather than something that can or should be learned. Some people have traits like empathy, self-awareness, and self-regulation that make it easier for them to demonstrate attributes of EI, but leaders who are motivated to improve their EI can do so if they are given the right information, guidance, and support.

Now matter how people view EI, cultivating an environment that prioritizes EI starts with leaders, but will trickle down to all members of an organization. Research shows that a leader’s emotional style drives everyone else’s moods and behaviors through a neurological process called “social (or mood) contagion.” A leader must determine how his or her emotional leadership drives the mood of the organization and adjust behavior accordingly. That does not mean that an executive need be happy all the time, but rather that he or she should display situationally appropriate moods while modeling how to face challenges realistically and respectfully, and move forward optimistically.

In order to actively influence how mood affects others, one must both be aware of and regulate one’s own emotions, as well as be aware of and help regulate the emotions of others. To be aware of the emotions of others requires empathy. Studies show that when employees are understood, they feel more engaged, and an engaged workforce is a high performing one. Gallup polls have found for many years that the single most important thing that employees want from their employers and managers is to feel that they care about them as a person. Those who try to create environments that reflect trust in their employees and who try to check in on their mental health, end up having happier and more productive workforces, says **Allen**. “There are some old school leaders who fear that if you have empathy, that means you can’t hold someone

accountable. But having empathy doesn't prevent you from telling someone you need something more or different from them," **Allen** says. "Rather, when you do so with empathy and understanding, you are actually more effective as a manager. But to have that empathy and understanding, you need to be emotionally intelligent."

To be most effective, a team also needs to create emotionally intelligent norms that support self-awareness and emotional regulation, building the foundations for genuine collaboration and cooperation, and preparing a team to respond effectively to emotional and logistical challenges. These norms create resources for working with emotions, foster an affirmative environment, and encourage proactive problem solving. These norms are particularly necessary for today's fast-moving world and myriad of turbulent challenges, such as navigating a pandemic and supply chain issues. People who are emotionally intelligent are able to handle and adapt to change better, and employees and leaders who are able to practice self-regulation are better equipped to handle disruption calmly and efficiently.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

These norms cannot be adopted without buy-in from leadership. Management can't just talk about EI, but needs to model the behaviors and showcase its impact on the organization, cautions **Vellios**. He says some of the consequences of leadership not practicing EI include: lower proactiveness and higher reactivity, leading to conflict and company gridlock; ineffective or reduced communication, resulting in blurred company vision, misunderstandings, and inconsistent messaging; and higher risk of public exposure for insensitive or tactless handling of challenging topics, news, or changes.

Allen agrees, reiterating that if emotionally intelligent behaviors are not modeled at the top, they cannot be expected to occur at lower levels of the organization. And if employees

are expected to model EI behaviors but see management failing to do so, she says the perception of hypocrisy can "contribute to employee disengagement, resentment, lack of loyalty to the company, and resignation in pursuit of a better opportunity that is more aligned with the employee's values."

In light of the pressing necessity to foster a sense of community and shared objectives in a hybrid or remote workplace, and the obstacles that must be overcome to reach that goal, the need to cultivate EI takes on an even greater sense of urgency. High levels of EI in leaders create safe environments for sharing, trust, healthy risk-taking, and learning. Low levels of EI in leaders produce environments rife with fear, anxiety, resentment, disloyalty, and distrust.

To illustrate this point, **Bulgarella** recently worked with a client to study how different leadership styles affected teams in a remote setting. She found that emotions play a huge role, particularly when the manager demonstrated a caring and dedicated attitude. "That is incredibly important when it comes to people feeling purposeful and attaching meaning to what they are doing. [We found that] EI matters in a different way now that we are working in a hybrid environment or remote setting, particularly because managers have fewer opportunities to model good behavior in those settings, but they still have plenty of opportunities to pass their emotional energy onto people who are far away from them. By doing that, they can influence teams in a variety of potentially negative or unproductive ways."

In light of changes to the physical workplace, **Allen** believes we will learn more over time about how to be emotionally intelligent in hybrid and totally remote work environments, but in general we probably need to be more intentional and deliberate about the practice. She advises managers and leaders to make time on a regular basis to check in individually with their team members. They need to ask for and

receive feedback, and implement changes based upon the feedback to demonstrate the value they attach to input from their team members.

When it comes to leading with EI in a remote or hybrid environment, **Vellios** recommends several practices: “Keep your promises and be crystal clear with expectations. Be transparent and show your coworkers their time, insight, and contributions are invaluable. A saying that I use with clients is “Authenticity Brings Commitment” (ABC). Practice your authenticity and be who you are. Your colleagues will notice. And finally, be consistent. Although the logistics might be different working remotely than in-person, try to have an approach that translates into both.”

Companies may also need to educate leaders about EI and why it matters, **Allen** says. This could be done as part of team offsites/retreats, in the context of offering executive/leadership development coaching to new leaders, or when leaders are promoted to the next level of leadership. She suggests not to wait until a leader fails before providing the opportunity for development.

Vellios suggests some cues companies can look for when trying to identify if action needs to be taken to develop EI in certain leaders or teams. Besides keeping watch for ego, apathy, insensitivity, or incivility, which can spread and fester, he suggests looking at turnover report data with more scrutiny. “The old saying ‘people leave managers not companies’ will remain a staple for many more years to come. It is not enough for HR to do an exit interview. Invest in more stay interviews and encourage leaders to take the pulse by engaging more and actively listening,” he advises.

If you provide a leader with insights on how his or her performance in those realms affects other things that are important, such as team culture and performance, it becomes much harder to be dismissive in the face of that evidence. “The practice of ‘asking, listening, and pausing to take perspective’ attached to a specific domain

(e.g., a critical challenge, an area of controversy, etc.) is likely to generate more positive change than feedback alone,” advises **Bulgarella**. “For example, receiving anonymous feedback may feel emotionally unsafe to the manager, especially when the input comes from the whole team. As a result, the manager may feel so defensive that all the learning potential the feedback offers will be lost.” Instead, she says that the entire team, not just the manager, should shoulder the burden of creating emotional safety. This process includes engaging in a shared inquiry of what emotional safety means, developing a mutual understanding of what it entails, and deciding where/when “asking, listening, and pausing to take perspective” is especially important.

Not only will developing effective EI in leaders take time, but also personalization. Some leaders may have some hallmark traits of EI, like self-awareness, says **Allen**, but are not able to effectively apply them because they need skill development, practice, or ongoing coaching to make these behaviors part of their normal behavioral repertoire. Such steps could include pausing, calming oneself through breathing or walking around, or non-defensive responses to feedback. Getting feedback from trusted colleagues or asking for 360-degree feedback can help shine a light on problem areas or measure the impact of improvement efforts.

Beyond asking for 360-degree feedback to measure the impact of EI efforts, **Bulgarella** suggests considering the downstream outcomes. An organization needs to think about the downstream outcomes it wants EI to influence, and these things should in some way be part of the measurement approach that organization uses. So first an organization must identify what goals cultivating an emotionally intelligent workforce would achieve, such as employee retention, creativity, inclusivity, productivity, or proactive problem solving, and then devote resources and time to checking in on the process and course-correcting if those goals are not materially changing. By continuing to measure

progress, organizations will be better-positioned to proactively address cultural toxicity that could lead to burnout, high turnover, apathy, anger, miscommunication, gridlock, or costly mistakes.

ABOUT THE EXPERTS

RANE expert Dr. Christine Allen, Vice President and Workplace Psychologist/Executive Coach at Insight Business Works

Workplace Psychologist/Executive Coach and Consultant specializing in helping companies and organizations with the people-side of business. Passionate about helping individuals, teams and organizations succeed through knowing their strengths, weaknesses, and by capitalizing on opportunities to grow and develop. Experienced in leadership development, team effectiveness and team coaching, talent selection and assessment, team building, executive coaching, onboarding, work/life balance, peak performance, tailored 360 assessments, and health and wellness.

RANE expert Dr. George Vellios, Managing Partner, Straxo

Dr. George Vellios is an expert in organizational effectiveness, helping clients manage their human capital through behavioral assessments, management training, leadership development, and Human Resource risk compliance. He is currently a Managing Partner at Straxo, where he primarily serves clients in the Healthcare, Retail, Financial, and Professional Service industries.

George is a sought after speaker at leadership retreats and conferences, and often speaks on the topics of team synergy, emotional intelligence and workplace culture.

RANE expert Dr. Christine Allen, Vice President and Workplace Psychologist/Executive Coach, Insight Business Works

RANE expert Dr. Caterina Bulgarella, Co-Founder & CEO, Be Thread

Caterina Bulgarella is a Co-Founder of Be Thread, where she leverages her expertise in organizational development, leadership development, change management, employee engagement, and talent management.

Bulgarella helps companies address challenges and questions including— How does a company engage employees, and infuse passion and purpose at work? How does an organization build an ethical culture? How does a company develop leadership capacities for an era of fast change and deep complexity? How can an organization equip self-directed teams with agility and adaptability?

In addition to her role at Be Thread, Bulgarella works as part of the Core Research Team at Ethical Systems, and as an Adjunct Professor in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at New York University. She is also a Contributing Writer for Forbes, where she writes about leadership strategy. Prior to these roles, she worked as a Senior Leader in the Governance, Culture, and Leadership Practice at LRN from 2013 to 2017, and as Vice President of the Research and Advisory Services at GuideStar Research from 2004 to 2013.

ABOUT RANE

RANE (Risk Assistance Network + Exchange) is a global risk intelligence company that provides risk and security professionals with access to critical insights, analysis, and support, enabling them to more effectively anticipate, monitor, and respond to emerging risks and threats. RANE clients benefit from improved situational awareness, more efficient access to relevant intelligence and expertise, and better risk management outcomes. Join the millions who are tapping into the collective wisdom of the world's largest community of risk and business professionals. For more information about RANE, visit www.ranenetwork.com.