



# **Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee discuss their book, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence***

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## **What does “primal leadership” mean?**

At its core, leadership is rooted in emotions. The fundamental job of a leader, then, is to prime good feelings in those they lead. Leaders who excel in this create what we call *resonance*—a reservoir of positivity that unleashes the best in people. Those who foster negative emotions create toxic environments that hinder people’s potential. We argue that if leaders fail in their primary task of driving emotions in a positive direction—nothing else they do will succeed as well as it could or should.

## **In *Emotional Intelligence*, it was argued that EQ matters more than IQ in learning and educational success. Does *Primal Leadership* argue that emotional intelligence is the key to success for CEOs?**

Emotional intelligence is indeed the key factor that separates outstanding leaders from their peers. But primal leadership extends far beyond executives—and beyond the world of business. Particularly in complex and changing times, people are leaders—in varying degrees and at different times and situations—in just about every aspect of life. Some people hold an official leadership title—manager, coach, teacher, etc. Others simply rise to the occasion, stepping up to lead in a crisis or other event. The emotional intelligence competencies we identify, the leadership styles we outline—and particularly the learning process we detail—can be applied by any leader, regardless of what entity or group of people he or she leads.

## **We usually think of leaders as smart, decisive thinkers. Why do emotions matter so much for leadership?**

Despite the great value that we seem to place on an intellect devoid of emotions, our emotions are quite literally more powerful than our intellect. In moments of emergency, our emotional centers actually commandeer the rest of the brain, so leaders who are not emotionally intelligent—who can’t keep their emotional impulses in check or correctly read the emotional temperature of a given situation—will simply not be effective. Biologically speaking, the art of resonant leadership interweaves our intellect *and* our emotions in a way that inspires people to move forward toward a common goal—regardless of the situation.

## **You talk about another reason that emotions are so critical for leaders—the idea that emotions are contagious. Can you explain the “open loop” theory?**

Scientists have found that the emotional center of our brain operates as an “open loop” system. Unlike our circulatory system, which is a self-regulating, closed system that can’t impact anyone



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outside of ourselves—an open loop system depends largely on external sources to manage itself. In other words, just by being around other people, we can change their very physiologies—their hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms—and consequently, their emotions. The reason this finding is so critical for leaders is that emotional contagion spreads most readily from the top down. A positive, inspiring, resonant leader radiates optimism and possibility, propelling people forward. Conversely, an intimidating, cold leader contaminates everyone’s mood, and the quality of the overall climate spirals down.

**Do all emotions spread with the same ease?**

Studies done with working groups in organizations have found that cheerfulness and warmth spread most easily, while irritability is less contagious. But laughter in particular demonstrates power of the open loop in operation. Hearing laughter we automatically laugh or smile too, creating a spontaneous chain reaction that sweeps through a group. That’s because our brain includes open loop circuits designed specifically for detecting smiles and laughter, which makes us laugh in response. In a neurological sense, laughter represents shortest distance between two people, because it instantly interlocks limbic systems—the emotional centers of their brains.

**Is this the feeling we get when we seem like we’re “on the same wavelength” with someone?**

Any time we have a genuine connection with someone—whether a pleasant time or even a good cry together—it signals we’ve literally experienced an interlocking of brains. The emotional centers in our brain actually act as a relay station in the interpersonal open loop for emotions. There is circuitry that attunes our own biology to the dominant range of feelings of the person that we’re with, so that our emotional states tend to converge. This tacit harmony occurs in any good human connection—between a mother and child, with friends over a cup of coffee, among team members laughing together as they work. It’s the resonance that can trigger a sweep of emotion through a group or crowd—whether the feeling is grief or excitement.

**The EI model you outline in this book looks different than that in *Emotional Intelligence and Working with Emotional Intelligence*.**

Our thinking about the dimensions of EI, and their accompanying competencies, has evolved and been streamlined as we’ve analyzed new data. Where we formerly listed five main domains of EI, we now have simplified the model into four domains: self awareness, self management, social awareness, and relationship management. And there are now 18 EI competencies instead of the original 25. The result is an EI model that more clearly links specific clusters of competencies to the underlying brain dynamics that drive them.

**Is there a certain number of EI competencies a leader must have in order to be effective?**

**Which competency would you say is the most important?** Effective leaders typically demonstrate strengths in at least one competence from each of the four fundamental areas of EI. In terms of importance—all of the emotional intelligence competencies build on self-awareness. But in terms of relationship skills—which are so critical to success in any aspect of leadership and life—empathy is absolutely essential. Without this ability to really listen and take in others’ perspectives, we can’t tune into the emotional channels between people that create resonance.

**You say the best leaders draw from a repertoire of six leadership styles. How can leaders know which style is right for which situation?**

Truly resonant leaders automatically scan people—individually and in groups—reading cues in the moment that tip them to the right leadership need, and adjust their styles on a dime. Leaders who have mastered the four resonance-builders—visionary, coaching, affiliative, and



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democratic—have the very best climate and business performance. When the situation calls for it, they even apply the more risky pace-setting and commanding styles—but they do so with the requisite dose of self-discipline so as to avoid creating dissonance.

**Can't resonance sometimes be bad—as in when charismatic leaders motivate people to do wrong?**

Certainly the Hitlers and Pol Pots of history have used their charisma and authority to rally people around a moving—but destructive—message. But that's the crucial difference between resonance and demagoguery. While demagoguery casts its spell around destructive emotions like anger and fear, resonant leadership is grounded in a shared set of constructive values that keep emotions resounding in the positive register.

**In some ways it seems like anger and fear—while negative emotions—are motivating. They get people to act quickly.**

Yes, but from a biological perspective, these emotions were designed for short, intense bursts meant to prepare us to fight or run. If they last too long or are continually primed—as with leaders who exclusively use the commanding or pacesetting styles—they exhaust us. Anger or fear may get us through the crisis of the day, but they are short-lived motivators.

**How do you explain the success of so-called S.O.B. leaders—individuals who eschew emotions in favor of results at any cost?**

We can all name an S.O.B. leader we've known who seemed to succeed by being mean-spirited rather than emotionally intelligent. But dissonant leaders like these only *seem* successful—whether by getting a promotion, through a rise in company profitability, or other short-term measure. But the toxicity such leaders leave behind belies their apparent success. In the long run, leaders who operate exclusively in the negative emotional range demotivate and eventually just burn people out.

**How does your theory about primal leadership impact the debate about whether leaders are made or born?**

There is a genetic component to emotional intelligence, to be sure—but nurture plays a major role as well. While people may differ in the initial level of their natural abilities, everyone can learn to improve, no matter where they start out. The challenge of mastering leadership is a skill like any other, like improving your golf game or learning to play the guitar. Anyone who has the will and motivation can get better at leading, once they know the steps.

**Let's talk about these steps: the “five discoveries.” How does this process work?**

The five discoveries is a self-directed learning process that reflects the way our brain actually operates. It begins with envisioning your “ideal self”: who you want to be, and then comparing that image to who you are now. It then involves constructing a learning agenda that seeks to close the gaps between the image and the reality. By experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point where they become habit—and by enlisting others to help us in this process—the five discoveries actually enable us to “rewire” our brains. In other words, they work with the emotional brain's natural learning process to erase negative habits and replace them with new and better default leadership skills.

**What about that old saying “you can't teach an old dog new tricks”? Isn't it too late to fundamentally change our habits and skills as adults?**



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Neurological research has shown that our brain *can* create new neural tissue as well as new neural connections and pathways—even through adulthood. At any point in life, neural connections used over and over become stronger, while those not used weaken. Clearly then, the act of learning is the key for stimulating new neural connections. When it comes to developing leadership, it takes an approach that works with how our emotional brain actually operates to create these neural changes. That’s exactly what the five discoveries process does.

**Why is motivation so critical to leadership development?**

When we try to learn leadership skills as adults, the new lessons we’re trying to learn fight an uphill battle against the engrained patterns the brain already has in place. It’s a double task—we have to undo habits that don’t work for us, and replace them with new ones that do. So we have to work harder and longer to change a habit than when we learned it in the first place.

**In addition to improving individual EI competencies, you show that it’s also possible to raise the *collective* emotional intelligence of groups and organizations. How do the two differ?**

Both require the same EI competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management are all as critical within groups as they are for individuals. What is different in group and organizational situations is that the EI competencies relate to individuals *and* the group as a whole. Groups have moods and needs, and they act collectively—just think about the last time you walked into a meeting late and could actually feel the tension in the room. The job of the leader is to read the emotional pulse of the group and work with its established norms and culture to drive change.

**Most adults spend the majority of their days at work. How does primal leadership apply outside the office?**

Sharpening EI competencies enables us to bring home heightened levels of self-awareness and empathetic understanding, self-mastery and attuned relationships to our marriages, families, children, and communities. And if education could be focused on the EI abilities that foster resonance, we could prime whole new generations of leaders-to-be, already adept at these key work skills. Young people would personally benefit by being better able to handle impulses and rocky emotions—the drivers of a range of social ills from violence to substance abuse. Beyond that, communities would benefit from higher levels of tolerance, caring, and personal responsibility. Although the foundations of primal leadership are being laid in the workplace, the benefits will accrue not just for business, but for families, communities, and society as a whole.

**Primal Leadership**

*Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*

**Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee**  
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