

Interviewing leadership candidates for emotional intelligence

There's nothing new about the concept of emotional intelligence (EI). The term became a part of the standard business lexicon in 1995 when author and psychologist, Daniel Goleman, analyzed jobs at 121 organizations. He found that 67 percent of the 181 competencies that distinguish the best performers at work are emotional competencies. When compared to Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and expertise, EI mattered twice as much.¹ Today, with the power of EI now broadly recognized, many companies have incorporated EI assessments into their performance review and succession planning processes. However, few have found a way to incorporate EI assessments into their interviewing and candidate evaluation processes.

To increase the chances of making sound hiring decisions, many organizations subject candidates to an extended interview process. According to author and leadership consultant, Adele B. Lynn, conducting more interviews is not the right answer. "What's needed are better interviews—interviews that measure candidates' emotional intelligence."² The subjective data obtained from incorporating EI assessments into the interview process for executive roles could give your business a significant competitive edge.

"No doubt emotional intelligence is rarer than book smarts, but my experience says it is actually more important in the making of a leader. You just can't ignore it."

-Jack Welch, Chairman of General Electric

Four EI leadership competencies

Goleman identified the following four EI leadership competencies:³

- 1. Self awareness.** This is the ability to recognize your own mood, emotions, and drives, and the related impact these attributes have on others. Self awareness is signaled by self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, and a self-deprecating sense of humor.
- 2. Self management.** The ability to control your own disruptive impulses and moods. The propensity to suspend judgment and to think before acting. Indicators include ability to deal well with difficulties or criticism, take initiative, demonstrate achievement, act with transparency (owning and learning from mistakes), and optimism, even in the face of failure.
- 3. Social awareness.** The ability to understand the emotional make-up of others and to use this with empathy in developing and retaining talent.
- 4. Relationship management.** Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks. The ability to find common ground, build rapport, and inspire others. Includes the ability to lead change, expertise in conflict management, and the ability to develop and lead teams in a collaborative manner.

Focusing on these four competencies in the interview process may help identify candidates with high EI and eliminate those who could leave collateral damage in their wake. Additionally, companies may want to have candidates complete a written exercise. For instance, having the candidate write a letter introducing him/herself to the executive staff or to significant customers. Review the letter for how welcoming it sounds and for how it represents the values and mission of the company. Another option is to have the candidate respond to one question for each competency in writing.

In addition to using interview questions or writing exercises, there are numerous tests and tools that can assist in evaluating EI. While these assessments may play a role in the overall evaluation of a candidate based on EI, they may not tell the whole story. We have found that the best insights are gleaned through well worded interview questions. These questions elicit answers that can be compared and contrasted with your organization's desired level of EI for the executive team. For this reason, we believe that asking specific questions designed to shed light on a candidate's EI is the best way to determine the correct fit of an individual to an organization.

Five tips for EI interviewing success

While asking EI interview questions, and probing and evaluating the answers, it is important to:

- 1. Select candidates who are honest about themselves.** It takes self-awareness to be practical about your own psychological composition. Many otherwise competent leaders lack this form of emotional intelligence.
- 2. Be direct.** Besides asking, "Describe a stressful situation at work. What did you do?" turn the question into a "how do you handle" question with specifics to your organization's situation. For instance, "How do you handle a member of your executive team who fails to communicate because they are in jeopardy of not achieving their goals?"
- 3. Seek hires that will attract collaborators.** After self-awareness, EI is really about knowing how to relate and work well with people. Ask the candidate, "How do your colleagues benefit from working with you?" to determine if the candidate is rewarding to deal with. If you can determine the candidate's ability to effectively collaborate, and you know that the candidate has the right skills, IQ, and work ethic, you will have done significant due diligence in determining who to hire.
- 4. Be mindful about asking the same questions, in the same manner, to each candidate.** This is important in terms of assessing and differentiating answers between the candidates in order to determine the best fit for your company and your executive team.
- 5. Do not base hiring decisions on EI alone.** Although EI is a significant factor to a potential candidate's long term success, companies need to be prudent about interviewing for technical qualifications and depth of functional experience. For this reason, interview questions addressing EI should account for 20 to 30 percent of the hiring decision. It should be only one of several indicators used to determine the most qualified candidates for the job.

"In the fields I have studied, emotional intelligence is more powerful than IQ in determining who emerges as a leader. IQ is a threshold competence. You need it, but it doesn't make you a star. Emotional Intelligence can."

-Warren Bennis, Scholar and Leadership Expert

Interview questions and key points for the four EI competencies

It may not be important for your organization to ask all of the following questions or cover every competency. Some organizations may choose to ask one question per competency, while others decide to focus on the two competencies they view as most important.

Self-awareness. EI allows an individual to be aware of and read cues in different situations, adapting their behavior accordingly. Answers to the following questions may give clues to a person's awareness and perception of these cues.

- > Can you think of a time when one of your team members, or even a customer, interpreted something you said or did in a negative way, even though you did not intend for it to be negative? Explain to me what happened.
- > Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you needed to adjust your behavior? How did you know? What did you do?
- > Tell me about a time when you purposely prepared yourself to deal with a situation that you knew would be negative or stressful? What did you do? How did it work out?

Some candidates may be reluctant to admit that something they said was interpreted negatively. As an interviewer, you can ease the candidate to a sense of safety by introducing the question with, "We have all had times when people misinterpreted our communications."

Self management. As you assess the answers to the first two questions below, look for tendencies to give excuses. Some candidates may say they don't want to hurt others' feelings, or they were afraid the organization wouldn't back them. The third question tests for resilience. Look for methods a candidate may use to overcome the situation.

- > Describe a time when you and one of your executive team members were at odds about a particular decision or direction for the company. What did you do?
- > Tell me about a time when you decided not to address an issue with one of your executive team members. What did you consider?
- > Describe a time when you didn't think things could get any worse for your business and yet, they did. How did you handle that?

These are tough questions to answer. Watch for and consider carefully, answers that suggest the candidate avoids or deflects issues.

Social awareness. Quite likely the most important competency for fit to your company's culture, social awareness is the ability to detect crucial networks and nuances at work in an organization. Use the following questions to assess a candidate's natural propensity toward empathy, humility, and willingness to take responsibility for their actions.

- > Tell me about some people whom you have had to work with on a regular basis that you find difficult to get along with. What have you done to build a stronger relationship?
- > Tell me about a time when you rejected one of your team member's ideas or opinions about a project.
- > Describe a time when someone felt you were unfair. What did you do?

"Research shows convincingly that emotional intelligence is more important than IQ in almost every role and many times more important in leadership roles."

-Dr. Steven Covey, Author and Leadership Consultant

In addition to asking the candidate these and other questions, take time to talk with him or her about their past experiences to bring up examples of how they read cultural situations and work with others.

Relationship management. More than just interpersonal relationships, this competency focuses on the ability to inspire others and create resonance to a company's mission or vision, to challenge the status quo, and to bring out differing perspectives in a collaborative fashion.

- > Describe a situation where you had misplaced optimism. How did you proceed?
- > Tell me a time when, as a leader, you found it necessary to bend the rules. What did you do? Why did you do it? How did you feel about it?
- > What evidence do you have that you have created a positive climate or culture at your current employer?

To keep assessments of these answers from becoming too subjective, use follow-up questioning to have the candidate provide metrics about what the outcomes or results were over time.

How to incorporate EI into your interview process

Next time your organization is planning to hire a new team member, remember that the key to successful candidate evaluation is effective interviewing—not extending the interview process. Consider meeting with your executive team to determine which EI competencies are most important to your organization and develop a strategy that will enable you to evaluate each candidate during the interview process. If you are uncertain of the value this can add, examine the details behind your organization's recent separations at the management and leadership levels. There is a strong possibility that more mismatches are related to EI than other factors. Chances are, incorporating the EI factor into your hiring process will ultimately save your organization time and money.

Sources

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“To be successful leaders, we need to intentionally develop and use more of our interpersonal relationship skills.”

-David Hallquist, CEO of Vermont Electric Cooperative