

The EI Advantage... Why It Matters More Than Ever

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January 2026

Emotional Intelligence for L&D professionals and people leaders who want to lead with more clarity, connection and confidence.

Exec Summary

In an era defined by complexity, uncertainty and constant change, technical capability alone is no longer sufficient for effective leadership. Emotional intelligence (EI) has continually emerged as a critical differentiator — enabling leaders and professionals to navigate pressure, build trust, foster collaboration and create psychologically safe environments where people can perform at their best.

This white paper explores why emotional intelligence matters more than ever, and outlines the core EI competencies we need now — self-awareness, empathy and resilience.

Our author, Amy Stewart, brings over two decades of experience designing and delivering no-fluff, high-impact learning experiences across sectors from finance and government to tech and not-for-profit. An accredited Emotional Intelligence Practitioner, she works with humans who want to lead other humans—clearly, confidently and with emotional intelligence.

The plan for this paper is to get you talking, thinking and doing things a little bit differently. It also provides practical insights into how EI capabilities strengthen relationships, collaboration and performance. Drawing on social neuroscience and contemporary leadership research, it offers practical reflection points and resources for leaders committed to developing emotionally intelligent leadership practices.

Why Emotional Intelligence Matters More Than Ever

The nature of leadership has fundamentally shifted. Hybrid work, rapid technological change, heightened stakeholder expectations and ongoing uncertainty have placed unprecedented emotional demands on leaders and teams alike. In this environment, how leaders *think, feel and respond* has a direct impact on engagement, trust and outcomes.

Emotional intelligence can be described as *the capability to intelligently use emotions to produce a desired result* (Dr Ben Palmer, Genos International). Far from being a ‘soft skill’, EI is a core leadership capability that influences decision-making, behaviour under pressure and the quality of relationships at work.

Importantly, global workforce research highlights that the future of work will continue to value human-centred and adaptive capabilities alongside technical skills. The *World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report (2025)* identifies several of the fastest-growing skills by 2030 that directly intersect with emotional intelligence. These include **resilience, flexibility and agility** — reflecting the capacity to manage emotions and adapt under pressure; **curiosity and lifelong learning** — underpinning self-awareness and openness to feedback; and **leadership and social influence** — which inherently depend on empathy,

effective interpersonal awareness and the ability to navigate social dynamics. Even skills such as **creative thinking** and **analytical thinking** are enhanced in environments where individuals regulate emotion, engage others constructively and sustain psychological safety. This global trend underscores that EI-aligned capabilities are not optional, but increasingly recognised as essential competencies in the workforce of now, and tomorrow.

Research consistently shows that leaders with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to:

- Navigate ambiguity and complexity
- Build strong, trust-based relationships
- Regulate emotional responses under pressure
- Create psychologically safe environments
- Foster collaboration and performance

The good news is that emotional intelligence is not fixed. Advances in social neuroscience have demonstrated that the brain is highly adaptable. With awareness, intention and practice, leaders can strengthen their EI capabilities over time

The Social Neuroscience of Emotions

Understanding the neuroscience behind emotion provides a powerful foundation for emotionally intelligent leadership. At a simplified level, two key systems are at play:

- **The Amygdala**, responsible for threat detection and emotional reactivity
- **The Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)**, responsible for reasoning, perspective-taking and impulse control

Advances in social neuroscience have demonstrated the dynamic interaction between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex in emotional regulation and decision-making (Salzman & Fusi, 2010; Janak & Tye, 2023).

Under pressure, the amygdala can hijack our thinking, triggering rapid emotional responses that may not serve us well. The role of emotional intelligence is not to suppress emotion, but to recognise it early and engage the PFC to respond more thoughtfully.

Leaders who understand this dynamic are better able to pause, reflect and choose responses aligned with their values and leadership intent — even in challenging moments.

The EI Advantage: Core Competencies for Today's Leaders

While emotional intelligence encompasses a range of capabilities, three competencies are particularly critical in today's leadership context: **self-awareness, empathy and resilience**. According to [Genos International's emotional intelligence model](#), these three key competencies (amongst others) underpin effective leadership and workplace performance.

- **Self-Awareness: The Aware Leader**

Self-awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence. It involves recognising one's emotions, thought patterns, triggers and impact on others — especially under pressure.

An emotionally aware leader regularly asks questions like:

“Is how I am thinking helping me right now?”

“What is the best use of my energy right now?”

These simple questions create space between stimulus and response. It allows leaders to notice assumptions, emotional reactions and habitual thinking patterns before acting on them.

Self-aware leaders are more likely to:

- Regulate their emotions effectively
- Seek feedback and reflect on their impact
- Make more balanced decisions
- Model accountability and learning

Without self-awareness, even well-intentioned leaders can unintentionally undermine trust, collaboration and psychological safety.

• **Empathy: The Empathetic Leader**

Empathy is the ability to understand and appreciate another person’s perspective, emotions and experience — without necessarily agreeing with them. In leadership, empathy strengthens connection, trust and engagement.

Practising empathy starts with active listening and showing genuine appreciation for what someone is sharing. Simple phrases such as **“Thank you for sharing”** or **“Gosh, that sounds tough”** signal that you’re present and acknowledging their experience.

Pair this with curiosity—seek to understand rather than assume—by asking thoughtful questions like **“How did that land for you?”**, **“What did that feel like?”**, **“What do you want to do next?”**, **“Tell me more...”**, or **“Help me understand...”**. These small, intentional actions create space for connection, demonstrate care, and build trust.

Another effective ways leaders can build empathy is by paying attention to **micro-moments** — brief interactions that carry disproportionate emotional impact. As explored in *The Power of Moments* by Dan Heath and Chip Heath, certain moments stand out because they elevate, connect or reframe experiences.

Imagine a team leader who walks past a colleague’s desk and says, **“I noticed the way you handled that client call — really thoughtful work”**. It takes less than 10 seconds to say, but for the recipient, it can create a **lasting sense of recognition, confidence, and connection**. That tiny acknowledgement can be remembered long after a formal performance review. Other examples might include: a manager sending a **quick handwritten thank-you note**, a leader pausing a meeting to **celebrate a small team win**, or even a colleague **remembering and asking about a personal milestone** like a birthday or the name of a new pet. All are brief but carry a disproportionate emotional impact.

Empathetic leaders:

- Notice small cues in behaviour, tone and energy
- Listen with curiosity rather than judgement

- Validate emotions, even when addressing performance issues
- Create moments that build meaning and connection

By embracing more of these micro-moments, leaders can significantly enhance relationships and team cohesion.

- **Resilience: The Resilient Leader**

Resilience is the capacity to adapt, recover and respond constructively in the face of challenge, pressure and change. For leaders, resilience is not just personal — it is contagious.

A useful way to understand resilience is through the internal dialogue between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex:

Amygdala:

“They just cut me off mid-sentence! They must be trying to humiliate me. I’m going to show them who owns this meeting.”

PFC:

“Slow down. You’re feeling angry, and that might be skewing your judgement.”

Amygdala:

“Yes, of course I’m angry! But... okay, go on.”

PFC:

“What evidence do you have that this was intentional?”

Amygdala:

“Hmm... I don’t know.”

PFC:

“Perhaps there’s another explanation. Maybe they don’t have the full context.”

Amygdala:

“Maybe that’s true. I don’t feel as fired up now. I could help fill in the gaps.”

Resilient leaders are not emotionless — they are reflective. They recognise emotional reactions early and deliberately reframe situations to maintain perspective and effectiveness.

One powerful resilience practice is to **deliberately seek discomfort**. Stretching outside comfort zones — through feedback, new experiences or challenging conversations — helps train the brain to tolerate uncertainty and respond more flexibly over time.

Paul Taylor, neuroscientist and author of *Death by Comfort*, emphasises that intentionally embracing periodic discomfort — whether through physical challenges like cold exposure, intermittent stressors, or stepping outside our comfort zones — can actually build resilience and strengthen our capacity to cope with life’s demands, rather than weaken it.

Taylor proposes that modern comfort culture dulls our stress tolerance and that *productive stress* is a catalyst for adaptation and growth — echoing the idea that discomfort isn’t something to avoid but a mechanism through which the brain and body become more robust.

When was the last time you leant into discomfort, or actively sought discomfort? Some powerful reflections a resilient leader might regularly ask of themselves!

Practical Outcomes: Collaboration, Psychological Safety and Stronger Relationships

When leaders consistently demonstrate self-awareness, empathy and resilience, the impact is tangible.

- **Enhanced Collaboration**

Emotionally intelligent leaders foster open communication, manage conflict constructively and encourage diverse perspectives. Teams feel safer to contribute ideas and challenge thinking without fear of negative repercussions.

- **Psychological Safety**

Psychological safety is created when people feel respected, heard and supported. Leaders who regulate their emotions, show empathy and respond thoughtfully to mistakes play a critical role in creating environments where learning and innovation thrive.

- **Stronger Relationships**

Trust is built through consistent, emotionally intelligent behaviour — particularly in moments of pressure. Over time, this leads to stronger relationships, higher engagement and improved performance.

Reflection: Over to You

Leadership development relies on reflection and intention. Consider the following prompts:

Keep:

- What emotionally intelligent behaviours are you already demonstrating consistently?

Start:

- What new practices could you introduce to strengthen self-awareness, empathy or resilience?

Stop:

- What habits or reactions may be undermining trust or effectiveness? Small, deliberate changes can have a significant cumulative impact over time.

Additional Resources and References

Self-Assessment

How well do you feel you currently demonstrate emotionally intelligent leadership competencies? Self-assessment is a powerful first step in building awareness and identifying development priorities. Looking to complete your own EI self assessment? Scan the QR code below for your free copy.



Look Beyond Borders

Engage in a simple four-minute experiment designed to challenge assumptions and broaden perspective. Small mindset shifts can unlock greater empathy and insight. Watch the video [here](#).

Let's Connect

Developing emotional intelligence is an ongoing journey — one that is most effective when supported by reflection, feedback and practical application. If you'd like to explore how emotionally intelligent leadership can be embedded within your organisation or leadership practice, let's connect via LinkedIn (QR code below) or via email amy@amystewart.com.au.



References

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