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Sensitive But Not Sentimental: Emotionally Intelligent People Can Put Their Emotions Aside When Necessary

Moïra Mikolajczak[a]*

Nathalie Balon[a]

Martine Ruosi[a]

Ilios Kotsou[a]

[a] Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

*Corresponding author: Moïra Mikolajczak, Université catholique de Louvain, Department of Psychology, Research Unit for Emotion Cognition and Health. Place Cardinal Mercier 10, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. Telephone: 0032 10 47 44 09, E-mail: Moira.mikolajczak@uclouvain.be

Abstract

Are emotionally intelligent people sentimental? Does their greater sensitivity handicap them or are they able, as theory would expect, to experience and regulate emotions flexibly, depending on their goals? We examined this issue in organizational settings. Good managers are indeed expected to be both attuned to feelings (theirs as well as their subordinates') and able to put them aside when needed to take tough (but necessary) decisions. Our results show that emotionally intelligent managers do make better managers, as reflected by greater managerial competencies, higher team efficiency and less stressed subordinates. Moreover, and most importantly, emotionally intelligent managers are not just nicer managers. As our results show, emotional intelligence has nothing to do with sentimentality. Actually, it is managers with low EI who have the greatest difficulties to put their emotions aside and not let them interfere when inappropriate.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; emotional competence; sentimentality; flexibility; organizational; work; stress; team.

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1. Introduction

Although all humans experience emotions, they markedly differ in the extent to which they identify, understand, regulate, and use their emotions and those of others. The construct of emotional intelligence (EI) has been proposed to account for this variability (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Besides the tremendous amount of research that it has generated, this concept has also aroused an on-going interest among lay people and the business world (Goleman, 1995, 1998a, 1998b). The latter has been the first sector to realize the potential of EI, paradoxically before clinical and health settings, which only took interest in EI applications recently (Mikolajczak, Petrides & Hurry, 2009; Cordovil et al., 2010). The business' world early interest in EI originally came from the fact that it provided an easy and straightforward explanation for why people with a high IQ and high technical skills do not always make good managers. Companies saw in EI the ideal candidate to improve selection (EI tests would increase the likelihood to put the right men in the right place) and training processes (EI training would compensate for people's soft skills weaknesses). Each year, companies invest billions of dollars in emotional intelligence and play a significant role in EI research, by raising questions, stimulating scientific investigations, and motivating researchers to convert their results in applied interventions.

The current research also stems from organizational preoccupations and aims to address some companies' fear that managers trained to be more emotionally intelligent would become sentimental and incapable of taking "hard" decisions (e.g., firing some people to preserve the job of the great majority). While this question

represents a pragmatic preoccupation of companies, it constitutes a legitimate question that has never been addressed so far: Are emotionally intelligent people sentimental? Namely, might their greater sensitivity constitute a handicap, particularly in circumstances in which emotions need to be put aside? This question is highly relevant as the label "emotional intelligence" would not be suitable if emotionally intelligent people cannot put their emotions aside when needed. Should emotionally intelligent people be sentimental, there might be considerably less benefit for companies to hire managers on that basis.

In addition to its practical relevance, this issue is also interesting from a research point of view. It indeed lies at the intersection of three subfields in EI research: EI and empathy, EI and emotion regulation, and EI and decision-making. Regarding empathy, research shows that people with high EI decode others' emotions more quickly and more accurately (Austin, 2004; Edgar, McRorie & Sneddon, in press), and that they are more sensitive to others' misfortunes (Austin, Evans, Goldwater, & Potter, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Regarding emotion regulation, the literature indicates that people with high EI are better able to deal with emotionally difficult situations (Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011; Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quoidbach, 2008; Mikolajczak, Roy, Luminet, Fillée, & de Timary, 2007; Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, & Hollander, 2002; Saklofske, Austin, Galloway, & Davidson, 2007). As far as decision-making is concerned, the results are mixed, such that it is difficult to conclude whether high EI would lead people to make their decisions intuitively on an affect-based manner (as reported by Leary, Reilly, & Brown, 2009) or rationally, based on deliberate and thoughtful reasoning (as suggested by Laborde, Dosseville & Scelles, 2010). The few

studies which examined whether EI improved decision-making in the lab have yielded contradictory results (Day & Carroll, 2004; Demaree, Burns & DeDonno, 2009; Telle, Senior, Buttler, 2011). Therefore, we currently do not know whether EI would help people to put emotions aside when the decision-making process requires it.

Theoretically, one would expect EI to foster sensitivity but *not* sentimentality. Although people with high EI are more sensitive, more affected by others' misfortune and more empathic, their greater ability to regulate their emotions should help them to put emotions aside when necessary. Therefore, and this is the main hypothesis of this study, we expect managers who have high EI, to be perceived as having high EI by their employees and to be perceived as more capable of making emotionally difficult decisions by their employees.

Besides, we also hope to replicate previous findings showing that emotional intelligence is related to better managerial competencies (e.g., Gardner & Stough, 2002; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Wong & Law, 2002), and extend them by examining the impact of the manager's level of EI on his/her team effectiveness and his/her subordinates' stress. Although it has already been demonstrated that the subordinates' *own level of EI* influences team effectiveness (e.g., Jordan, Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Hooper, 2002; Jordan & Troth, 2004) and their own levels of stress (e.g., Slaski & Cartwright, 2002), it has never been shown, to our knowledge, that the *manager's level of EI* influences the effectiveness of his/her team and the level of stress of his/her subordinates. If this is right, it would mean that increasing managers' EI would have a double advantage: improving their performance and well-being, but also their subordinates'.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

In total, two hundred and one employees took part in the study. Sixty-seven managers were surveyed (mean age: 43.88; SD = 10; 64% men and 36% women), as well as two subordinates per manager (mean age: 32.5; SD = 9; 51% men and 49% women). The data were collected by two interviewers who went on site in each company, after being allowed by phone or email to bring questionnaires. They met the manager, as well as the two first available subordinates. Each member of the triad (manager, subordinate 1, subordinate 2) completed the questionnaires separately. Managers completed measures of self-perceived emotional intelligence and managerial performance. Subordinates appraised their manager's emotional intelligence, managerial performance, and ability to put emotions aside when necessary. The latter also completed measures of stress and team effectiveness. Responses were anonymous, but people were identified with sophisticated codes to permit data matching.

2.2. Measures

Emotional Intelligence (managers' self-appraisal) was assessed using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue-SF; (TEIQue-SF; Petrides, 2009). This measure comprises 30 seven-point items (from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) providing a global EI score. In this study, the internal consistency (alpha) of the scale was .90. Examples of items are « *I'm usually able to find ways to control my emotions when I want to* » and « *Generally, I find it difficult to know exactly what emotion I'm feeling* (Reversed) »

Subordinate perception of their manager' emotional intelligence was assessed using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-360-Short Form (TEIQue 360°-SF; see Petrides, Niven, & Mouskounti, 2006). This measure, designed for peers or 360° assessment, consists of 15 items, each representing one of the 15 facets of the TEIQue. Its internal consistency was .93 in the present study. Examples of items are "My manager [*N+1*] *is able to express his/her feelings to others*]" and "M*y manager* [*N+1*] *is good at managing others' emotions"*.

Ability to put one's emotions aside when necessary was assessed using a measure developed for the purpose of this study. This measure comprises 7 four-point items, rated from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Its internal consistency was .88. Example of items are: "*My manager* [*N+1*] *is able to put his/her emotions aside in order to take disciplinary actions when necessary"*, "*My manager* [*N+1*] *would be able to settle a disagreement between two subordinates",* "*My manager* [*N+1*] *could make decisions for the good of the company, at the risk of displeasing some of his subordinates"*, "*My manager* [*N+1*] *would let an employee arrange their schedule for personal reasons, even if this would hinder the department's operation" (reversed).*

Subordinate's perceived stress was evaluated via the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS: Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The PSS is a 10-item scale designed to measure the degree to which individuals appraise their life as stressful. All items begin with the same phrase: In the past month, how often have you felt… (e.g., *In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?*). It is scored on a 4-point Likert scale. The PSS reliability was .88 in this study.

Perceived team effectiveness was measured using a 7-item scale, scored on a four-point Likert scale (totally disagree to totally agree) (Balon & Ruosi, 2010). Sample items are *"Our team feels responsible for its work", "Our team is efficient" "Our team cooperates".* The reliability was .93 in this sample.

Managerial competence was appraised using a 14-item questionnaire adapted by Jaeken (2008) from the "Leadership Architect" (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003). Sample items are (preceded by "*I am able to…"* for the manager self-assessment, and by "*My manager is able to…*" for evaluation by subordinates) "…. *be efficient and productive in terms of time management, definition of goals and priorities, and commitment fulfilment*" "*…acquire new competencies in order to prepare for future challenges*", "*… motivate the team*", "… "*manage the variety of views and experiences of collaborators, in order to get the most out of it*". The reliability was .79 in the present sample.

2.3. Statistical Analyses

As subordinates were nested in managers, mixed models (i.e., multi-level models) were used to analyse the data. In order to get a single indicator of managers' level of EI (self-appraisals correlated .60 with subordinates' perceptions), we factor-analyzed the evaluations of managers and subordinates (supposing that both contained a grain of truth), and used the factor score as an indicator of manager's EI. This value has a correlation of .89 with both the subordinate reports and the manager' self-evaluation. It is of note that the results and their significance remain unchanged whether we run the analyses using the managers' self-report, the subordinates' evaluation, or the factor score. In order to facilitate the graphical representation of the effects, we categorized managers' EI in three levels (bottom to

percentile 33,33; percentile 33,34 to percentile 66,66 and percentile 66,67 to top), which we named low EI, average EI and high EI, respectively (see Table 1 for group description). The reason for splitting EI scores in three groups (instead of two) is that it provides a more accurate idea of the effect because it more clearly distinguishes average scores from higher and lower scores.

3. Results

As represented in Figure 1, analyses revealed that EI did not foster sentimentality. On the contrary, and as expected theoretically, EI helps to regulate emotions and put them aside when necessary ($F_{(2;122)} = 66.5$, $p \leq 0.001$). Planned contrasts with Bonferroni adjustments for multiple comparisons revealed that low EI managers differ in that respect from both average and high EI managers ($p \leq 0.001$ in each case), while the latter two did not statistically differ, suggesting that managers with low EI (particularly) experience difficulties in putting their emotions aside when necessary.

As expected and as can be seen on Figure 2, the level of EI also predicted managerial competencies ($F_{(2;123)} = 123.5$, $p \leq 0.001$). Planned contrasts with Bonferroni adjustments revealed that managers with high EI were viewed by their subordinates as having higher managerial competencies than managers with average EI ($p \leq .001$), who were in turn perceived as having better managerial competencies than managers with low EI ($p \leq .001$).

The same was true for team effectiveness, which could also be predicted by the manager's level of EI ($F_{(2;123)} = 64.4$, $p \leq 0.001$). As depicted in Figure 2, planned contrasts with Bonferroni adjustments showed that subordinates of managers with high EI described their team as more effective than subordinates of managers with

average EI ($p \leq 0.005$), who in turn described their team as more effective than that of managers with low EI ($p \leq .001$).

Finally, as expected, the managers' level of EI predicted the level of stress of their subordinates ($F_{(2;123)} = 29.2$, $p \leq 0.001$). As depicted in Figure 2, planned contrasts with Bonferroni adjustments showed that subordinates of managers with high EI were less stressed than subordinates of managers with average EI ($p = 0.001$), who were in turn less stressed than those of managers with low EI ($p \leq 0.001$).

All the above-mentioned results held when participants' gender, age, education level and length of service was controlled for.

4. Discussion

This study corroborates previous claims that emotional intelligence has added value in organizational settings (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005; Joseph & Newman, 2010; Petrides & Furnham, 2006; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004). Emotionally intelligent managers make better managers, as reflected by their greater managerial competencies, a higher team efficiency and less stressed subordinates. The later two aspects are important as they "materialize" the benefits of higher managerial competencies. These outcomes, which had never been studies in relation to managers' level of EI, are of particular interest as they greatly contribute to organizational climate and success. For instance, greater team efficiency leads to increased organizational performance (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996) while less stress leads to increased job satisfaction, less burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) and less turnover (Parasuraman & Alutto, 1984).

Besides these findings, this study is also the first one to show that emotionally intelligent managers are not just nicer managers. As our results show,

emotional intelligence has nothing to do with mawkish sentimentality. One can be both attuned to feelings AND able to put them aside when necessary. As reflected in the expression “an iron fist in a velvet glove”, diplomacy does not preclude firmness.

While this study contributes to enrich our understanding of emotional intelligence and its effects, its results must be interpreted in the light of several limitations. First and foremost, it would have been even more interesting to directly measure managers’ behavior instead of their subordinates’ reports of it. Yet, subordinates’ reports of managerial behaviors are massively used in organizational research and have demonstrated validity in spite of biases (Bass & Yammarino, 1991). Secondly, it would have been ideal to complement measures of team effectiveness by objective measures of team profitability. However, it was in most cases impossible to obtain a measure that would reflect the profitability of a single team, because the end product was often the result of the work of several teams. Finally, results would have been stronger if we had used a previously validated measure of the “ability to put one’s emotions aside when necessary”. But such measure did not exist in the literature. Future studies will certainly benefit from validating a more complete assessment of this construct.

This study thus leaves plenty of room for future studies to probe or refine its findings. In addition to addressing the above-mentioned issue, future studies might certainly benefit from adding a measure of subordinates’ EI to the battery. It is indeed plausible that subordinates’ EI and managers’ EI interact: the importance (predictive power) of the managers’ EI is probably greater when subordinates lack EI. Another research direction would be to replicate the current findings in different settings. It is indeed likely that the effects observed in the current study also apply in

educational and family settings. Teachers and parents with high EI may also be iron fists in velvet gloves, that is, taking their feelings as well as their children's into consideration, while being able to put them aside when necessary. Finally, as the current design does not allow inferring causality, it would be useful to clarify this in an experimental prospective study that would, for instance, increase the level of EI of half of the managers (e.g., via EI training) and then observe if there is an increase in the managerial competencies of this group, an increase in their team effectiveness and a decrease in their employees' level of stress.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Each EI Group

	Low EI	Average EI	High EI
Group size	41	43	42
Number of men/women	23/18	29/14	26/16
Age (SD)	40.15 (6.28)	41.31 (8.63)	45.51 (10.99)
Level of education	4.10 (0.81)	4.45 (0.71)	4.58 (0.74)
Length of service	8.55 (4.28)	10.88 (6.73)	16 (9.12)