

The Quiet Competency: Emotional Intelligence in Library Leadership

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When people hear the word “leader”, many images come to mind. Perhaps there is a figure enrapturing their audience with a stirring speech, or rallying their fellows to a higher cause. Or perhaps there is something smaller; a person holding an agenda, or observing from a desk. While there are many different aspects to what defines an effective leader, the focus of this paper will be the unique competency known as emotional intelligence, and how it’s application affects the leadership landscape.

Definitions of Emotional Intelligence.

The Library Leadership and Management Association (2016) defines emotional intelligence as “...understanding and improving the way [the leader] perceive and manage their own and other people’s emotions, applying concepts such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills to inform interpersonal interactions”. According to the citations given on the same webpage, this definition is itself a synthesis of two foundational theories: the Goleman and Salovey Mayer models of Emotional Intelligence (or EI). Goleman’s (1995) competency model is based on describing what EI *is*, clustering facets under the two main categories of personal and interpersonal-based skills. Salovey and Mayer’s (1997) model instead focuses on what EI *does*, sorting the emotional abilities into four groups: *perception/expression*, *facilitation*, *understanding*, and *management*. While all of these sources are utilized when analyzing the literature, particular attention must be paid to the Salovey and Mayer’s (1997) model, as it is the most applicable towards describing the following phenomenon.

Themes and Lenses

As the literature on EI and leadership were reviewed, three themes became apparent: that EI creates perception, facilitation, and resilience. The first two themes were unsurprising, as they directly map to the Salovey and Mayer (1997) model. However, the theme of resilience was somewhat novel, not appearing on its own but rather as an accumulative effect. These themes shall be explored within the literature through three different lenses: the organization, the patron, and the self.

EI and the Organization

As the nature of information continues to change, the institution of the library must change with it. While not strictly focused on information science, Tsakalerou (2016) focuses on the impact of emotional intelligence on product development and innovation- both vital processes to any library. Tsakalerou (2016) tested for EI factors across teams engaged in various inventive projects. There were three different variations accounted for amongst the development teams: the complexity of completing their project (*complexity of fact*), how ambiguous the process was for their project (*complexity of faith*), and how conflicting the interests of the team members were (*complexity of interaction*). Across all three complexities, the result was the same: the greater the degree of complexity involved in the process, the more EI was an indicator of productivity.

The results of this study suggests that the value of EI is far more than simple group cohesion. Rather, it assists the process of innovation because it increases the availability of “intangible capital”. The “intangible capital” referred to in the article is roughly equivalent to the accounting term of *intangible assets*. Intangible assets are resources that hold value without taking a physical form, such as trademarks other intellectual property. But, it can also refer to emotional capital such as brand recognition and goodwill. And for the purposes of this paper, I

will be using “intangible capital” as an umbrella term for the increased emotional and intellectual capacity that can result from the proper practice of EI.

EI and the Process of Innovation.

A library works with a variety of stakeholders by nature, especially in an innovative process. Say, for example, a library wishes to develop a children’s summer reading program. A youth librarian might spearhead the project, but library staff would likely assist with logistics, teachers and parents may want input in material selection and timing, and the local council or governing body may need to be petitioned for funding. Each of the stakeholders mentioned are likely to have different values, different areas of expertise, and different definitions of success. This would be considered a situation with a high complexity of interaction.

But appropriate application of EI in leadership creates a kind of psychological safety-net. In a collaborative environment, creativity flows when people can put forward divergent ideas and unconventional knowledge without the fear of exclusion or derision. To return to the accounting comparison: the liability incurred by participation is reduced, and thus the intangible capital is increased proportionally.

Apart from increasing intangible capital, leveraging EI to include a variety of people in the innovative process also has a secondary benefit: speeding the adoption of the product by the user base. While working at a software company that specialized in government contracts, our team would run into a specific issue so often, it had its own name: the “daddy did-it clause”. When significant upgrades were released for the software, the clients would inevitably resist the change the upgrade brought even if it would make their lives easier. They simply preferred what had become familiar over time, doing things a certain way “because that’s how my Daddy did it”. This effectively doubled our team’s work, as we then had to either persuade clients to update,

or maintain multiple versions of the software. But when we included our clients in the process, it gave them a sense of ownership over the new product. And that was often enough to massively speed up adoption rates, which was well worth the added complexity.

EI in disaster

Innovation is the process of improving upon the notion of normal. But what happens when “normal” is nowhere to be found? Leadership is the management of change, and there are few times when a library will face more rapid change than in a disaster situation. While combing through the stories of “Library Disaster Response Assistance Teams (or DRAT)”, Wilkinson (2015) identified five prominent themes, each of which could nested within the two major domains of EI as defined by Goleman: relationship management, and self management. (1995) When an organization is so thoroughly disrupted, the institutional framework for interactions is disrupted as well: there is no baseline of behavior being enforced from the outside. And so, each step of recovery must instead be initiated and maintained by the group, but on an individual level. Being able to inspire trust and cooperation is vital to maintaining any team effort. And being self aware enough to take initiative and adapt to difficult situations can provide much needed flexibility in times where nothing is certain. Although each of these aspects were performed independently by each team member, it was their cumulative EI expertise that enabled the organizations’ recovery (Wilkinson, 2015).

It is important to note that each study has its limitations. As Wilkinson’s scope of interviewees was very narrow: specifically those who had gone through disaster recovery procedures at academic libraries. As such her sample size was only 27 members, even after including people from a variety of library positions. Tsakaleru’s study was more robust, but with the added caveat that group dynamics of development teams may be more culturally influenced

(2016). Repeating the study in other locations was recommended to determine cultural bias. Both of these studies (Tsakalerou, 2016 and Wilkinson, 2015) are also interesting in their situations of study utilize structures of *shared leadership*, defined by (Koccolowski, 2010) as a form of leadership where direction and authority is decentralized and thus enforced collectively. Regardless, these studies demonstrate the facilitating power of EI, and how it can contribute towards the resilience of the institution on an organizational level; as protection against stagnation and the bludgeonings of circumstance.

EI and the Patron (or Follower)

Chien et. al asked the following question: how does EI influence work performance in job positions with high “managerial work demands”? (2012) Specifically, they wished to explore the topic through the lense of “trait activation theory” (or TAT), which states that certain helpful traits can be activated from the application of context cues experienced by an individual. While the terminology is different, high managerial work demand (MWD) positions are those which are likely to encounter the high complexities of fact, faith and interaction as described by Tsakalerou (2016).

To this end, 212 participants were given two surveys; one to self-report their EI skills, and another to measure the amount of MWD in their position. This was then measured against the work performance reviews of the participants’ supervisors, numbered at 462 total. When the data was analyzed, it was confirmed that EI assisted with work performance by lowering the threshold for context specific traits to be activated. Emotional perception was identified as particularly important because it allowed the participants to recognize context clues more quickly, which then prompted the participants to act (Chien et al, 2012).

EI and Trait Activation Theory

Trait activation theory is not unlike chemistry. Just as each chemical reaction requires a certain amount of activation energy to spur the reaction to begin, so does each person require a certain amount of indications that they should act. Emotional perception then acts as a catalyst. It does not cause the reaction itself, but instead lowers the threshold for it to start. While not mentioned specifically, a library leader clearly falls within the category of a high MWD position. Regardless of whether they are in a forward-facing position or not, they must keep their fingers on the pulse of their organization and their people.

Looking to leadership in the past and the future.

To determine what leadership qualities were considered most valuable amongst academic librarians, Jason Martin conducted a survey in 2018. In this survey, he asked two main questions: what stood out to them about a formative library leader of their past, and what did they think would be the most important leadership characteristic of the future? For the leaders of the past, the answer was unanimous: all of the participants identified some aspect of EI in the top of their ratings, regardless of the age range questioned. While EI was highest rated by “theme” (the general group of answers), the specific aspect that was mentioned the most often was empathy. Going beyond the ability to understand others, the participants recalled that what made their past leaders so memorable was their ability to leverage their empathy to reach out and include people of different backgrounds (Martin, 2018). For the future, the participants identified “facilitating change” and “people-oriented service” as highly valued traits. As stated above, change acts as protection against stagnation, and increases the resilience of libraries by expanding its informational foundations. The same argument could be made for leadership dedicated to assisting patrons, as it can then strengthen the user base of the library.

I believe that what makes empathy such a memorable trait of great past library leaders is the fact that it is a combination of Salovey and Meyers' (1997) ideas of emotional perception and emotional facilitation. The perception allows the leader to pick up on subtle aspects of a person, and facilitation empowers them to act in such a way to create a connection. The best leader I have known was a middle manager within a community college where I once worked. We were a small number of staff saddled with the survival of a department nearly abandoned by the directors. We had little by way of budget and less in prestige, just a small satellite campus in the bad part of town. And yet, she remembered things about people most wouldn't notice in the first place, steadily building relationships with the students who found themselves in our little corner. And as repeat students were the lifeblood of our funding, her perception both facilitated relationships with our key clients, and increased the resilience of our department.

While these studies address two seemingly disparate topics, they both seek to identify the effects of EI as viewed from outside the leadership personnel themselves. That being said, there are some aspects of "Leadership Qualities" (Martin, 2018) that I found lacking, especially when compared to "Emotional Intelligence and Job Performance" (Chien et al., 2012). To their credit, Martin (2018) was careful to conduct their survey to a respectable number of participants, and the distributions of those participants match the representative demographics of certified librarians at the time. However, I feel that auditing only the certified librarians creates an excessively narrow demographic to decipher beliefs that are then attributed to many. In contrast, the multi-layered use of job position in the Chien et al (2012) study was far more robust. Regardless, I still appreciate their attempt to analyze the data from that viewpoint, as the question of gender was not explored at all in Chien et al., 2018. Despite their differences, these

studies try to observe the application of leadership skills and their subsequent effects through the lense of both the leader and follower, and their articles confirm the results of preexisting work.

The absence of EI and the Perception of the Patron

Although 4 years apart, both SeyyedHosseini et al. (2014), and Jan and Anwar (2018) wanted to further study the relationship between EI and library anxiety in an academic setting. Library anxiety, as its name suggests, is a form of anxiety which prevents students from utilizing library resources and speaking with library staff. While both of the studies are similar, certain differences must be noted. Firstly, while each survey was conducted by questionnaire, different factors were controlled for. Jan and Anwar (2018) strictly controlled for student population and library usage, restricting their scope to senior students of an agricultural major in a college with only one library. SeyyedHosseini et al. (2014) in contrast did not control for discipline or library, instead casting a wider net for survey participants.

Both studies demonstrated a correlation between a lack of EI and increased library anxiety. There were many reasons why the students viewed the library with trepidation, but the top three answers show issues arising due to a lack of the librarians' demonstrated interest or skill. Female students showed higher amounts of anxiety in both studies, with the "Barriers with Library Staff" (Jan & Antwar 2018) students outright stating they felt that the library staff were indifferent to their needs. "Barriers with Library Staff" (Jan & Antwar 2018) participants also showed a greater amount of library anxiety overall, possibly relating to lack of base involvement with the library due to their agricultural major.

Like in "Antecedents of Innovation", (Tsakalerou, 2016) the promise of intangible capital is being weighed against the emotional lability of the interaction. But in this case, the perception of the librarian is not the how they are able to see the emotional cues of others, but what

emotional cues they themselves give. And as the recognized leaders of the library, the librarians gave cues interpreted by students as “high liability” individuals.

EI and the self.

While leadership skills are most often measured by their outside impact, it is important to remember that those skills are first practiced within the self. This is doubly true for EI, as it directly relates to emotional regulation as a foundation for resilience, and self awareness as a facilitator of change. (Salovey & Mayer, 1997)

Kahn, Masrek, and Nadzar sought to better define the relationship between EI and job satisfaction within university libraries in Pakistan. They felt that both job satisfaction and emotional intelligence were poorly defined within academic literature, and the relationship between the two inconclusive (Kahn et al., 2016). They found that EI aspects of self-awareness and self-regulation had the strongest relationship between itself and job satisfaction, and optimism the least (Kahn et al., 2016). When one considers job satisfaction as contentment over time, this makes sense. Optimism is the belief that the future outcome will be acceptable regardless of current circumstance. It can provide a temporary bulwark against rapid change or undesirable conditions, but that is just that: temporary. Self-awareness and self-regulation draw appropriate boundaries between what is and what is not under a person’s control; allowing the person to envision the ideal while still acknowledging the current circumstances.

EI in absence: frailty and disfunction

It can be tempting when looking from afar to idealize the library setting as bucolic fields of learning and enlightenment, with librarians as metaphorical shepherds. But the truth of the matter remains: people are above all, people. And as such, they are just as vulnerable to the foibles and conflicts that can plague any organization. Like “Barriers with Library Staff” and

“Library anxiety and Emotional Intelligence”, Henry et al. (2018) wanted to inspect what happens when EI is absent in library leadership. What they found was telling, and troubling. A vast majority of participants had experienced work-specific incivility, most often in the form of aggressive or disrespectful communication. When asked specifically about being bullied, there was a 40/60 split on who had experienced it firsthand, and who had seen it occur to others (Henry et al., 2018). The most common source of bullying was identified to be people in positions of authority, followed by peers. The trend of failed leadership continued when discussing workplace culture, as reported instances of defective workplace culture were ascribed to flawed leadership attitudes.

When asked for suggestions on how to remedy these workplace issues, the answers were clear: management and EI training were recommended for those in leadership positions (Henry et al., 2018). While both studies were self-reported and thus vulnerable to bias, I believe these remedies would be effective. Learning how to properly govern and administer a group of people is a cornerstone of leadership education, and it makes sense how a lack of such skills could then echo out into workplace difficulties. EI is also vital in preventing incivility, as it moderates communication and emotions even if it is only applied on a personal level. Empathy was the most reported EI strength amongst library staff, and self management the least. Perhaps this goes to show that even EI skills must be used in conjunction with one another, as what good does the increased perception of empathy do, if a person lacks the self-management to respond to it in an appropriate manner?

Unfortunately, I have been on the receiving end of such workplace dysfunctions, and have seen firsthand how EI can make or break a work atmosphere, a person’s resilience within it. My former software team was presided over by the business owners, two people who knew what

they wanted, and little patience for those who strayed from their vision. I enjoyed the work itself, and my coworkers were exceptional. But the workload and overbearing bosses left little room to breath or learn. At first I was buoyed by optimism: it was only a matter of working harder, working better, and I would soon stand as an equal on our team. It was only a matter of time. And it was, but not in the way I expected. The work and harsh supervision ran me ragged. Eventually the optimism ran out, and I was forced to make an honest assessment about what the work was doing to me. So I stayed long enough to train my replacement, and I left. I later found out that I was the sixth administrator they had hired that year. I lasted 6 months. My replacement lasted 2 weeks.

Although these two articles stand opposed in function, they both illustrate how the presence (and absence) of EI can be felt even when applied only to the self.

Conclusion

In the end, there was a fascinating variety of literature on what I had once imagined was a narrow subject. Across the literature, there were some interesting trends. For one, the research focusing on EI and library science was conducted almost entirely within academic libraries. This makes a certain amount of sense, as most of the researchers were academically affiliated; academic libraries would be the most convenient environment to work in. Repeating these studies in different types of libraries would help to expand the understanding of EI in library leadership by showing the differences in context that other library sectors provide. There was also a recurring theme of differences due to gender, even within a majority-female distribution of academic librarians. (Martin, 2018) Lastly, just as the aspects of EI do not operate within a vacuum, neither does EI itself. The cumulative effects of EI, and how precisely they overlap with other leadership competencies, would provide a rich source of research for the future.

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