



Theoretical and Practitioner Letters

Does leadership need emotional intelligence?

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ABSTRACT

Interest in emotional intelligence has bloomed over the last few years. That it has become a standard concept in general and applied psychology, as well as in applied business settings, is indubitable. Is this popularity warranted? Casting a shadow over the concept of emotional intelligence are concerns about its meaningfulness and the construct and predictive validity of its various measures. The following series of letters explores various issues surrounding emotional intelligence and leadership including: whether emotional intelligence is theoretically needed for leadership, the types of emotional intelligence tests that may hold the most promise, methodological standards for testing whether emotional intelligence matters, evidence from the neuroscience literature on emotions and intelligence, and evidence regarding the links between leader emotional intelligence and follower outcomes.

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Letter 1:

John Antonakis to Neal Ashkanasy and Marie Dasborough

Dear Neal and Marie:

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to engage you in a debate about a construct dear to many, but whose foundations I—and a growing number of others—consider to be feeble. I suggested the title of our exchange because it can be interpreted in one of two ways: (a) to advance, does leadership as a science need “emotional intelligence” (EI)? (b) to succeed, do leaders need EI? Before providing you with a more developed response as to why I will answer “yes” and “no” to the above two questions respectively, as well as discuss measurement and predictive validity concerns surrounding EI, I would like to make a one thing clear. I was, and am to a certain degree, open to the idea of new conceptions of intelligence (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). Yet, given the flimsy evidence, I have gone from pilgrim to skeptic. In the spirit of open inquiry, I hope that my letter will stimulate discussion on important issues surrounding EI so that the field of leadership advances, either pulling EI along the way or leaving it behind.

1. Claims, or reclamations and reclaims

Although you and I are now sitting on different sides of this academic issue, I was happy to see that you (Jordan, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2006) have recently tempered your position regarding the construct by explicitly questioning the hyperbolic claims made by some (e.g., Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002), who seem to care more about selling books than advancing science. That is, you show some skepticism too regarding whether EI predicts work success and leadership in particular. I took much pleasure from seeing you write that Goleman’s “claims have done considerable harm to the field” (Jordan et al., p. 204)—an estimation that I share with you entirely. Furthermore, you distance yourselves from Goleman and Bar-On (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2003), who have very

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broad definitions “trait” definitions of EI, and you have placed your bets on the Salovey & Mayer (1990) “ability” model. I commend you for this bold move. Self-reported trait EI will not do the trick, particularly if researchers control for IQ and personality (see Antonakis, 2003, 2004). Given that we agree on these points, I will refer mostly to the Salovey–Mayer ability model in my critique of EI. The Salovey–Mayer definition asserts that EI is an ability of sorts that is distinct from personality (though related somewhat to IQ, Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). This ability is composed of four branches: emotion perception, emotion facilitation, emotion understanding, and emotion management. I too think that this model might be the way to go, even though it is very disappointing to see that the meta-analytic correlation between the Salovey–Mayer MEIS ability scale of EI and performance outcomes was only .19 (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004).

Evidently, the EI product has been badly designed. In the face of mounting evidence not boding well for EI, consumer defenders are filing “class-action suits” so to say (e.g., Conte, 2005; Locke, 2005; Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002; Zaccaro & Horn, 2003; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004). I too recently suggested that given the sparse empirical evidence, it is unethical and unconscionable to use these measures in applied settings (i.e., for hiring, promotion, or retention, Antonakis, 2003, 2004). So, on one hand, I was encouraged to see you state that “management practitioners need to take care that they do not overemphasize the predictive value of emotional intelligence in workplace settings” (Jordan et al., p. 205). Yet on the other hand, you state there is a “logical tie between emotional intelligence and leadership,” that “Research has substantiated this intuition,” and that “the emerging empirical evidence supports the link between leadership ability (particularly transformational leadership¹) and the abilities-based model of emotional intelligence” (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005, p. 459 & p. 460).

These latter statements puzzle me. You took Goleman to school on his claims; then, without providing much methodologically defensible evidence published in peer reviewed journals, you suggest that EI matters for leadership (the evidence you cited in Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005, includes two conference proceedings, a doctoral dissertation that shows that EI is irrelevant at top leader levels of organizations, and studies that are methodologically weak, as based on the criteria I use below). How then, can you still have so much faith in the power of EI, even suggesting that emotional intelligence training for leadership is justifiable (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2003)? I would be interested to learn more about your position and to review any recent methodologically-robust studies you are aware of that I may have overlooked.

2. EI's purpose: helping to advance science by refutation

You apologize for the lack of empirical support because of the “infancy” of EI research (Jordan et al., 2006, p. 191). It is now close to 20 years since Salovey & Mayer (1980–1990) wrote their groundbreaking piece. With the correct instruments and careful measurement we can easily establish whether EI exists as it has been conceived and whether it predicts anything useful. Data showing the EI matters for leadership is nonexistent; either (a) EI researchers are using the wrong measures or the wrong methodology, or (b) EI does not matter for leadership.

At this point, I will get to the first question I posed in the beginning of my letter to you. It is an easy question to answer. *To advance, does leadership as a science need EI?* I answered yes, because to understand which individual-differences predict leadership effectiveness we have to, of course, identify correlates of leadership. We also must rule-out individual differences that do not correlate with leadership. Through theoretical deduction, intuition, observation or sometimes serendipity, scientists will come across constructs that could add predictive utility to their models. Scientists must be open-minded about all possibilities, including the possibility that a construct close to their hearts and one that is intuitively appealing might fail to predict what they would like it to predict. If constructs do not show any utility scientists ditch them and move on. This never-ending process of inquiry serves science in good stead and advances knowledge.

Whether or not EI proves to be useful in the end is irrelevant. Although EI has not shown much utility for leadership—as I discuss below—leadership research is benefiting by knowing that EI might not matter. Thus, future research will move on and avoid the pitfalls of the past (by either improving the measurement models or dumping the construct). I believe that current notions of EI—assuming that they are correctly defined and measured—will continue to produce the disappointing results that they have done in the past; so something must change.

General mental ability (or IQ) is the single best predictor of work success, with meta-analytic correlations that are high (.51–.62) that increase with job complexity; other meta-analyses show that the correlation between (a) IQ and objective measures of leader performance and that of (b) IQ and leader emergence is .33 and .50 respectively (refer to Antonakis, 2003, 2004 for cited references). These correlations are as good as they get in applied psychology. Furthermore, these correlations will not be easily displaced by other individual-difference measures (although established measures of personality do add some unique predictive variance).

The Van Rooy & Viswesvaran (2004) meta-analysis I cited earlier, which has been touted by EI aficionados to provide convincing evidence that EI matters for performance success indicated that EI *failed to predict variance in performance measures beyond the variance predicted by IQ* (and the correlation between EI measures in general and various performance measures was only .24). Of course, work performance and leadership are not synonymous; however, an ability measure, which is supposed to be general, should be able to predict outcomes in a variety of performance domains, as does IQ. IQ is a very good predictor of work success, management performance, training success, and leadership; however, it is not a perfect predictor. Simply because the theoretical

¹ This claim is based on the result of one conference presentation, Daus & Harris (2003) where the sample consisted of students working on a class project; thus, its ecological validity is highly dubious. Furthermore, Daus and Harris did not control for IQ or personality (though they did control for students' grade point average). Still these results were mixed because controlling for GPA, EI was unrelated to leader emergence and only one of the four EI factors was weakly related ($r = .22$) to the Kouzes-Posner LPI leadership scales.

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