

WHY "EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE" DOES NOT PREDICT LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: A COMMENT ON PRATI, DOUGLAS, FERRIS, AMMETER, AND BUCKLEY (2003)

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This article provides a commentary on the article "Emotional intelligence, leadership effectiveness, and team outcomes" by Prati, Douglas, Ferris, Ammeter, and Buckley (2003). The role of emotional intelligence (EI) as a construct in organizational behavior is addressed by discussing (a) the boundary conditions of theories in organizational behavior; (b) the relative importance of EI, IQ and personality in leadership effectiveness; (c) whether EI is needed for leadership effectiveness; (d) the degree EI is a unique construct versus a part of normal psychological functioning; (e) the relationship between EI and levels of analyses in organizations; and (f) whether EI is important for charismatic leadership. This discussion concludes with a cautionary note about premature excitement over the use of EI in the workplace.

Current interest in "emotional intelligence" (EI) has brought with it exaggerated claims about the utility of EI in industrial settings (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Evidence that EI is a viable construct independent of IQ or personality factors is sparse, and various measures of EI suffer from low reliability and validity (Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998; Matthews et al., 2002; Roberts, Zeidner, & Matthews, 2001). These problems would imply that speculating about the practical utility of the EI construct might be premature. Despite such warnings, EI is being viewed as a panacea for many organizational malaises with recent suggestions that EI is essential for leadership effectiveness (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Focusing on Prati, Douglas, Ferris, Ammeter, and Buckley's (2003) paper, in which they propose EI is vital for leadership, in this critique I lay out why these suggestions are unsubstantiated and will demonstrate that evidence supporting such claims is nonexistent, contradictory, incomplete, or misrepresented. Prati et al. argue that EI is necessary for leadership effectiveness and team functioning, proposing, among others that (a) "the emotionally intelligent team leader will induce collective motivation in team members" and (b) "The emotionally intelligent team leader uses charismatic authority and transformational influence in order to improve team performance" (pp. 27-29). Essen-

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tially, Prati et al. claim that EI is a "foundational element" of charisma and effectiveness, stating that high EI leaders empathize with others, appraise, predict, regulate, and manage emotions in themselves and others, which leads to improved team cohesiveness and motivation.

My commentary of their work is directed by the six following questions concerning the apparent link between leadership and EI:

1. is there robust empirical data indicating that EI predicts variance in leadership effectiveness beyond that which is predicted by personality and general intelligence factors?
2. are high levels of emotional appraising ability necessary or detrimental for leadership effectiveness?
3. is the ability to gauge emotions part of normal psychological functioning, culturally transmitted, and simply reflect tacit knowledge?
4. can the effects of EI be manifested at the group level of analysis?
5. is EI a necessary antecedent of charismatic leadership?
6. are emotional outbursts detrimental to leadership effectiveness?

BOUNDARY CONDITIONS OF THEORIES

In order for science to advance, speculation, which is accompanied by explicating the boundaries of the theory is needed. Boundaries may affect the level-of-analysis at which a variable may operate, the type of leadership that may emerge in a particular context, how behaviors are enacted in various contexts, and the dispositional antecedents of leadership, among others (Antonakis, Schriesheim, Donovan, Gopalakrishna-Pillai, Pellegrini, & Rossomme, 2004). Contextual factors potentially bounding leadership theories include national culture, hierarchical level, leader-follower gender, organizational and environmental characteristics, and so forth (see Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003). Prati et al., have not considered the boundary conditions of the EI construct. Thus, as I demonstrate below, many of their arguments are incomplete or misleading, suggesting that their propositions will not stand up to empirical testing.

"g" AND PERSONALITY: THEY MATTER A LOT

Prati et al. (see pp. 21-22), seem to suggest nothing else but EI matters for leadership, and make no reference to other dispositional variables known to be strongly related to leadership. They imply that researchers only advanced their knowledge of dispositional antecedents of effective leadership with the recent discovery of EI. It is important that I make this point, because if EI does not predict variance in leadership emergence or effectiveness beyond that which is predicted by established psychological constructs, then either EI is redundant or inutile. EI is up against pretty stiff competition. Meta-analytic results have indicated that (a) general cognitive ability ("g")—EI's nemesis—correlated .52 with leader emergence (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986); and (b) the "big five" personality factors demonstrated a multiple correlation of .48 with leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Other variables showing robust results include (a) leader implicit motives, predicting up to 51% of the variance in leader outcomes (e.g., Spangler & House, 1991) and (b) a configuration of personality and cognitive measures (i.e., "g", dominance, and self-efficacy) predicting 45% of the variance in leader emergence (Smith & Foti, 1998). The above results are impressive. EI

must add incremental variation beyond established psychological factors before one can claim EI is useful. To date, I have seen no convincing evidence—based on *specific* EI measures—of this having occurred.

EI IS NOT NEEDED FOR LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Prati et al. do not present robust empirical research (e.g., avoiding self-rating measures of leadership, avoiding common-methods variance or social desirability effects, controlling for “g” or the “big five”, etc.) that has used *EI measures* to demonstrate that EI matters; however, Prati et al. often refer to studies apparently providing support for their arguments. For example, they cited Sosik and Megerian (1999), who did not use *established EI measures* but personality factors (note: similarly, Prati et al. made claims about other research ostensibly having used EI measures—e.g., Williams & Sternberg, 1988—when in fact, they did not).

Indeed, there is very little empirical evidence published in scientific journals indicating that EI is necessary for leadership effectiveness when controlling for personality variables or general intelligence, especially at top leader levels using *practicing leaders* (e.g., see Buford, 2002; Collins, 2001; Schulte, 2002). A recent special issue of *Leadership Quarterly* (Vol. 13, No. 5) on emotions and leadership did not present any robust evidence showing EI to be a predictor of leadership emergence or effectiveness because many of the studies:

1. did not control for competing variables (e.g., intelligence, personality),
2. failed to avoid common-methods variance
3. did not use measures designed to tap EI (but, for example, use measures of empathy), or
4. used student populations (note: individual difference measures may demonstrate differential effects depending on context, see Judge et al., 2002).

Three personality factors that are conceptually related with facets of EI (e.g., self-monitoring, agreeableness, and need for affiliation) do not support EI being essential for leadership. Self-monitoring, implicitly referred to by Prati et al. as vital for leadership, has been shown to weakly predict leader emergence (meta-analytic $r = .18$, Day, Schleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002). Day et al. themselves questioned whether high self-monitors would be effective at top levels of leadership arguing that these individuals “may be less likely than low self-monitors to adopt firm strategic positions or communicate a consistent vision on key issues” (p. 398). Agreeableness is consistently unrelated to leadership in business samples (Judge et al., 2002). Affiliation is not conducive for leadership. High need for affiliation individuals tend to place individual interests above organizational interests, are submissive, do not adhere to consistent principles, and are troubled by difficult or contentious issues (see Antonakis & House, 2002).

Finally, elevated levels of emotional recognition may not be useful in industrial settings because individuals can easily gauge, then magnify or misinterpret negative emotions in others (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002b; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, in press). Elfenbein and Ambady concluded: “These findings suggest that in the case of emotional intelligence, one size may not fit all” (p. 970). Being *immune* to detecting subtle emotional nuances in others may actually be useful for leaders, especially top-level leaders, because they would be able to focus on the mission and would not be derailed by negative emotions, pandering to individuals, and being agreeable.

GAUGING EMOTIONS: IT'S NORMAL AND IT'S TACIT KNOWLEDGE

A normal, well-adjusted individual is perfectly capable of displaying what I would refer to as social skills unless the individual has alexithymia—a personality disorder (i.e., being unable to, among others, identify, discriminate and describe emotions in themselves and others, see Matthews et al., 2002). Being able to “read” social situations and having the skill to enact the correct behavioral repertoire in a particular context suggests that an individual is sensitive to external social stimuli and has developed rich cognitive schemata reflecting the appropriate event/social scripts in that particular situation (see Cianciolo, Antonakis, & Sternberg, 2004).¹ This knowledge is contextually sensitive and implicit, and is derived from experience, which suggests that social appraisal skills could be subsumed under general practical problem-solving ability (Hedlund & Sternberg, 2000). Thus, having the ability to predict that subordinates would “be of good cheer when they are given a raise, or to suffer dissatisfaction and anxiety when given a bad performance appraisal” (Prati et al., p. 25) is an indubitably banal skill that most normal functioning individuals have, independent of their ostensive EI level. Adding support to the argument that social appraising skills reflect contextually sensitive knowledge derived from experience is a recent meta-analysis in which emotional recognition was found to be largely a function of national culture (Elfenbeign & Ambady, 2002a). Out-group individuals were less likely to be able to gauge emotions of in-group individuals than were members of the in-group (note: EI levels of individuals were not controlled for; thus, skills associated with accuracy in emotional recognition are part of normal social functioning are culturally determined).

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND EI

Implicit in Prati et al.'s arguments is that leaders will affect team members homogeneously (i.e., at the team level of analysis). For that to happen, leaders would be required to be socially distant from their followers, treating them similarly, which is incompatible with Prati et al.'s arguments. Being socially distant would suggest that leaders cannot use individualized approaches to managing their followers independently (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). A well-established finding in the transformational-charismatic literature is that the effects of leadership operate on the individual level of analysis (i.e., followers have unique and independent perspectives of their leaders, see Yammarino, Spangler, & Dubinsky, 1998), which is especially more likely for leaders who are socially close to followers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

CHARISMA NEEDS VISION AND MORAL CONVICTION, NOT EI

Prati et al. suggest that high EI leaders use emotion to engender charismatic effects. Citing Wasielewski (1985), they state that charisma can only “be obtained by the emotional intelligent individual” (p. 28). In fact, Wasielewski never mentioned EI (not coined yet) nor do her writings imply that charisma requires undue levels of EI. What Wasielewski stated—which is consistent with the positions of most scholars of charismatic leadership—is that the leader-follower relation is based on emotional interactions and the identification of the follower with the leader. For this to occur, the

leader must be able to appraise and reflect the *collective* wants and aspirations of the group, identifying a deficiency in the status quo, and then project an emotional, morally-charged *vision* that implicates follower self concepts (see Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Through their personal commitment, courage, and confidence, which they transmit to their followers, the leader's vision is reified. Leaders thus use vision to transform and align followers. Dispositional antecedents of such behavior are a high need for power with a high responsibility disposition (i.e., using one's power to serve others and the greater good, Antonakis & House, 2002). In other words, the leader is guided by principles and the collective interest.

EMOTIONAL OUTBURSTS CAN BE USEFUL

Prati et al. suggest that leaders who display anger or other negative emotions will be ineffective and seen as unstable. In fact "No matter the cause, the effect of the leader's lack of emotional control [negatively affects] the team" (p. 27). Although they cite Wasielewski (1985) in terms of emotional expression being context specific, they chose to use EI precepts based, in part on Goleman's (1995) popular writings to state, "leader lack of emotional control was related to leader ineffectiveness" (p. 27). In fact, charisma is, among others, an outgrowth of leader emotional appeals, which could be based on a range of emotions including anger, disgust, and so forth (see Wasielewski, 1985). As stated by Wasielewski "A leader's display of an emotion like anger is much more memorable if it is punctuated by fist-shaking, yelling, and contorted facial expression" (p. 212)—hardly emotional control. Thus, with correct timing and using correct doses, emotional outbursts can be useful, symbolic, and engender follower identification and trust, as long as these emotions reflect collective sentiments and moral aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Space limitations preclude my discussing other contexts potentially moderating EI's utility (e.g., environmental risk, organizational characteristics, leader-follower gender, national culture, etc.). Empirical evidence demonstrating that EI explains a large portion of the variance in leader emergence or effectiveness is nonexistent or very weak at best and contradictory at worst. Prati et al's arguments are based mostly on anecdotal speculation, often using research based on established personality factors to argue that EI matters for leadership. As soberly summarized by Zeidner et al. (in press), "current excitement surrounding the potential benefits from the use of EI in the workplace may be premature or even misplaced."

I am sympathetic to alternative perspectives of intelligent functioning, especially as it relates to leadership (see Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). However, current conceptualization and measurement issues regarding EI, and the lack of theorizing and testing regarding the domains in which EI may be useful make me rather pessimistic about the utility of this construct for leadership. Assuming the hurdles regarding theoretical and measurement issues can be surpassed, reformulations regarding the domains in which EI may be useful—particularly in organizational contexts—are in order.

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NOTE

- I. Of course, individuals differ in the degree to which they can learn from experience; some learn better from experience than others do, suggesting that not everyone obtains "good" tacit knowledge in equal amounts.

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