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Unaware? Or Don't Care?

Skills and Professional Development



In some recent work with a client, I observed particular attitudes and behaviors that were disconcerting. As a person who studies human behavior in organizations, I recognize the impact those behaviors have on others. As we were digging into the cause of the attitudes and behaviors, it became clear that my client needed to do some serious introspection and self-analysis to get to the heart of why she was acting that way.

Our work started me thinking about the bigger picture of leaders and their need for self-awareness, which I believe is the cornerstone of what makes a good leader. It's necessary to balance this with a need to care about how the characteristics and traits they possess impact those they lead. Ultimately, what I'm talking about is John Mayer and Peter Salovey's emotional intelligence (EI), but I'm also concerned about an EI that is not frequently talked about — the entitlement indicator.

Emotional intelligence

At its core, EI is our ability to recognize our own emotions and those of others, to discriminate or categorize those emotions, and then to use that information to guide our behaviors and thinking. It is not, however, what EI is, but how it manifests itself that I find interesting in the study of leadership. There are four areas where EI is found — self-awareness, self management, social awareness, and relationship management. When we are able to master these, we are on our way to being the leader we are capable of being.

Self-awareness includes the ability to recognize our own emotions, knowing what we do and don't bring to the table, and being confident about who we are. Self-management involves our ability to control our emotions, staying true to who we are while simultaneously being flexible and optimistic in changing circumstances, and when things are not going our way. Social awareness requires that we

be in touch with what others are feeling. This is achieved by the ability to “read the room” and then meeting the needs of others. Relationship management is our ability to interact with others in such a way that we can inspire and influence them, take an active role in helping them to develop, and collaborate with them.

Entitlement indicator

While the first area of EI is important to leadership development, it can all be undermined by the second — a sense of entitlement that sends the message that we simply don’t care. In my work with clients, I notice a recurring theme with their difficulties in being a good leader: The attitude and the subsequent behavior that sends the message, “I am all that matters.” While few people would ever say that out loud, actions often speak louder than words.

When people move up the corporate ladder or organizational hierarchy, they take with them the behaviors that they think work — good and bad. The problem lies in not taking the time for personal observation and analysis about what is truly working with the teams they lead, so that when things inevitably go wrong, it is always someone else’s fault, because after all, “It is acting this way that has gotten me where I am.” The reality is that this may or may not be true.

Sometimes people, and we’ve all encountered them, have been promoted or ascend up the ranks of leadership for reasons that have nothing to do with their ability to lead people or even interact well with them. Holding on to an inflated sense of self or an attitude that we have been sanctioned to behave any way we want because of our title or position is dangerous in the long term to our ability to be good leaders.

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So what to do?

Others: Ultimately, the counterbalance to poor emotional intelligence and/or being filled with a sense of entitlement is focusing on others.

Observation: We have got to pay attention — attention to ourselves, our thoughts, our words, our behaviors, as well as pay attention to our followers, who they are, what they think, what they want, and what they need.

Obligation: There has to be a realization that once we step into the role of leader it is no longer all about us. We now have an obligation — an absolute responsibility — to not only look out for, but to work on developing those we lead. This is not something that can happen without being keenly aware of how who we are impacts them, and being in touch with and caring about their needs.

As leaders, it should be unacceptable to be unaware of or to care less about how what we do impacts others, particularly when the solution is simple. We should want to do something to improve — which goes back to knowing that we need to do better, and caring about if we do.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.