

# EQ For the Corporate Secretary – How to be an Influencer



Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is based on the ability to recognize, understand and manage our emotions and to recognize, understand and influence the emotions of others.

## Introduction

During my early, rather naive years as a newly qualified corporate secretary, highly engaged and eager to impress, I came across a phenomenon that until then, I had not directly encountered: office politics; more to the point, the politics of power. Every job comes with its share of hazards. One of the biggest hazards for a corporate secretary is being caught in the middle of a toxic work environment, something I found myself embroiled in. To say that the Chief Executive Officer and the Board Chair did not like each other would be an understatement, but they also intimidated and felt threatened by each other.

In view of the dual reporting role common to many corporate secretary positions, I found I was caught in the middle. The CEO would issue me with instructions which would subsequently be countermanded by the Chair, and this power struggle left me wondering how to respond without falling into a direct confrontation with one or the other. I promised myself to be true to my values and act with integrity, and it felt to me that the Chair was right; however, that put me in conflict with the person who effectively was paying my salary, the CEO.

Despite the stress of that traumatic time, I learned a valuable life lesson that corporate secretaries need to be able to be masters of tact and diplomacy; to tread carefully on eggshells yet be assertive enough to protect oneself with dignity while maintaining one's integrity; and to never panic. Valuable lessons they never taught me in my academic studies.

## The Concept of EQ: Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (or EQ for the purposes of this article) is a term used by two psychologists, John Mayer, now at the University of New Hampshire, and Yale's Peter Salovey. It is based on the ability to recognize, understand and manage our emotions and to recognize, understand and influence the emotions of others. At that time, back in 1995, the preeminence of IQ as the standard of excellence in life was unquestioned. If you had superior intellect, whether through experience or genetics, your chances of success were greatly enhanced. Since a science reporter at The New York Times, Daniel Goleman popularized the concept in his bestseller book "Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ" the term has become ubiquitous.



## What are the Traits of Emotional Intelligence?

Since Goleman's book, emotional intelligence has gained significant credibility as a factor in successful team and workplace dynamics. A manager or leader with high EQ is likely to lead a more successful team than one with low EQ and who relies on hierarchical authority to compel his team to carry out assigned tasks. Similarly to IQ, it is not a genetic trait that people are born with or not (although it sometimes seems that way). It's a skill that you can develop if you have the desire to do so, and cultivated by practice and experience. The path to higher EQ relies on honest self-reflection. The first (and arguably most important) element is **self-awareness**. Conducting an honest appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses and working to address those weaknesses is key. It takes humility to admit to your failings, even to yourself. Self-aware people know exactly how they feel and how their emotions can impact others. Being able to manage your emotions and staying calm under pressure are valuable attributes for a leader if they want to get the best out of their people. Who has not been shouted at by the boss? Remember how that feels? How can you give your best to a leader that humiliates you?

A second component of high EQ is the discipline of **self-regulation**, i.e. to stay in control. Leaders that self-regulate rarely verbally attack others, they make reasoned business decisions that are not swayed by emotion, and they have the courage to take personal accountability for their actions and the actions of their team. Strong self-regulation is underpinned by a strong value system and integrity, a critical attribute for a corporate secretary. They are able to assert themselves with dignity and authority; I've often heard people say that "George/Georgina is unflappable." I'm sure we have all seen and envied those colleagues.

A third trait of people with high EQ is their level of **motivation**. Highly motivated leaders set high expectations about their conduct and standards of performance and they demand the same of their team. They lead by example, and their passion and enthusiasm often ignites their team to greater performance. Not every highly motivated person possesses high EQ, but I have rarely seen a person with high emotional intelligence that does not have a spark of passion about his/her work. Their mindset is optimistic, and this equips them with a degree of resilience that allows them to calmly deal with stressful situations. They see mistakes as learning opportunities and look for the good points in the most difficult circumstances.

For me, the most compelling attribute in a good leader is the ability to display **empathy**, to "walk a mile in your shoes." They are the people that seek to understand another person's viewpoint, and this opens up a range of possibilities. They are able to give and graciously receive constructive feedback; they are excellent communicators because they deliver their message tailored to the individual to deepen understanding; they are effective coaches because through a process of questioning and active listening, they are able to provide mentorship and guidance in a way that relates to the recipient. Having empathy is also a good conflict resolution and negotiation tool. The awareness to see the bigger picture means that they are more open to changing a position rather than defending it vehemently. An empathetic person believes in win-win negotiation. This ability to communicate confidently and assertively allows them to show compassion to others. They seek to learn from criticism and never take it personally or hold grudges. An empathetic nature allows them to be open minded and not easily offended.

Finally, a person with high EQ is characterized by strong **social skills**. They are usually adept communicators, including public speakers, and their open nature allows them to respond positively to hearing bad news. My experience suggests that people with strong social skills are the best agents for change. They are rarely satisfied at maintaining the status quo. They like to innovate and embrace change, and are easily able to get their team excited about new projects through their vision and how they communicate it. Equally they bounce back quickly from mistakes and adopt a learning mentality, never beating themselves up over mistakes. If that means apologizing whether to their superiors or subordinates, they have the courage to stand up and do so. The best directors I have seen are ones that are not afraid to ask 'silly' questions, who are not content to go with the flow until they are satisfied. People possessing strong social skills are confident and charismatic, but not in an arrogant way, because it is usually allied to humility. They take responsibility for the failings of their team, but they are also quick to praise and acknowledge the contributions of their team when a project is successful. This sets an example of how to conduct oneself to others. It can be a powerful skill.

## What Other Factors Demonstrate High Emotional Intelligence?

There are numerous other traits that characterize people with high emotional intelligence. People that I have admired and aspired to be like in my career have tended to be people that know how to make things happen, to galvanize other people with their infectious energy and often sense of humour. They are able to manage people and get tasks done almost effortlessly. When I sat down and thought about the qualities that these people I admired so much, most of them possess some or all of the following:

- They do not aspire to perfectionism. They realize their limitations and understand that seeking perfection is usually an unattainable goal, and continue to push forward without procrastinating. If they make mistakes they don't attack themselves about it. They learn from it to improve, adopting a learning mindset. They know and accept their strengths and weaknesses and are honest with themselves.

However, they know how to leverage their strengths and cover their weaknesses by working with the right people in the right situation.

- They take a balanced approach to life, recognizing that overwork can lead to unnecessary stress and health problems. They always seem to be the ones who forget about work problems as soon as they leave the building and always seem to have an enjoyable or exciting weekend! Taking time to unplug and recharge your batteries is a vital ingredient of a happy and balanced life. Take care of yourself and you will be far more productive in the long run.
- People with high EQ accept change as a natural part of life. They don't dread or hide from it; rather they embrace it and sometimes thrive on it. They are the best innovators because they are also the most adaptable people. Evolution has taught us that you have to continually adapt to survive. They usually plan ahead so that they are not caught unawares by change.
- One of the qualities I respect in those people I have admired are their single minded focus and concentration. They are not easily distracted by their surroundings, and the 'noise' of their environment. They have the discipline to work on a task and ensure it gets completed on time.
- They are active listeners and their empathetic nature makes them curious about other people. It leads them to ask lots of questions whenever they meet someone new. They are also curious about processes, and can use this knowledge to engineer change.
- People with high EQ don't have the time to dwell in the past because they're too busy contemplating the possibilities that tomorrow will bring. They don't let past mistakes consume them with negativity. They focus on the positive, devoting their time and energy to solving a problem and focusing on things they have control over. As positive people, they seek out the company of other positive people that in turn boosts their energy even further. Positive people are always the most popular to be around because of the way they make others feel.
- They are highly assertive. They may seem like pushovers because of their politeness and compassion, but they are good at establishing boundaries. They are not afraid to

say no to others, and this helps them keep that balance referred to earlier. They know when to dial down their commitments so they don't get overwhelmed or burnt out.

### Can We Train Ourselves to be Emotionally Intelligent?

Developing emotional intelligence is not an overnight process. It takes years of thoughtful and conscious effort, but the good news is it can be learned and developed. As I mentioned, leaders with high EQ are not born but made. It takes time, practice and a lot of patience.

The first step is developing fluency in your range of emotions. This consists of taking time to analyze your emotions and the message it is sending you, as well as to differentiate between similar emotions, such as feeling sad versus overwhelmed. Emotions can feel like a powerful current that sweeps us along, controlling us rather than the other way round. A good example of this is when one feels an intense emotion like anger. We have all heard stories about people committing stupid, destructive or deadly acts while angry because at the time our rational powers are subjugated to blind instinct. We are no longer in control but we are still responsible for our actions. Neuro-science research has demonstrated that the mere act of naming our emotions lessens their intensity, because you are shining a cognitive spotlight on what you are feeling. Try it next time you are sitting in a traffic jam and you tell yourself "I am frustrated because I am stuck in traffic." See how much more relaxed both physically and mentally you will feel.

Similarly the act of writing down how you feel can be remarkably therapeutic. I have kept a daily journal since I was a teenager and I have found the mere act of writing a therapy in itself. Writing it down enables you to distance yourself from the intensity of the emotion. It is remarkable how less intense the pain and disappointment of a traumatic or difficult event feels when you record it in a journal. It has helped me through some challenging passages in life.

Another technique you can employ is to observe your emotions and not try to suppress them. We live in a society which expects us to suppress our emotions when we are out in "public," labelling certain emotions such as anger as bad and something to be suppressed. An unfortunate by-product of suppressing emotion in public is the incidences of domestic abuse that occur behind closed doors. Emotions are the result of millions of years of evolution. We cannot just switch them

on or off like a light, or suppress them when society expects us to. Emotions provide us with useful information about our perceptions of the world. They have a specific purpose that motivates us to a course of action.

Just imagine if you never felt fear. Sounds great to be fearless, but fear is designed to keep you safe from harm. Thinking of your emotions not in terms of good or bad but rather as useful information helps develop a greater awareness of your emotions. This self-awareness will also help you to recognize the triggers that may lead you to behave in a certain way, and to think about them objectively. The irony with an emotion such as anger is that when you are building up to anger, even a minor incident could set you off. Providing a self check-in will help you to avoid getting to that vicious cycle of anger. It can also help you to recognize recurring patterns. Our brains have the tendency to follow established neural pathways, so our reactions tend to be fairly consistent. Recognizing these patterns can help to break them. For example, you may say that “when I am angry I bottle it up,” which is never healthy as like a steam valve it will escape in another possibly more destructive way. Knowing this, you can work on providing a safe outlet (a gym punchbag works for me).

I have found in today’s social media world two distressing anger habits that many people suffer from. The first is to be overly judgmental or critical of others, when they label the person as stupid for some perceived action, as if to elevate their own superiority over that person. The second is the tendency for people to take offence unnecessarily in the slightest trivial matters, suggesting a degree of intolerance that can strain relationships and injure our own health. Don’t be that person. Taking notice of how we react is valuable information for our own self-regulation.

You can conduct your own self-evaluation by considering the following:

- Observe how you react to people. Are you prone to rush judgment before you know all of the facts? Do you stereotype? Are you critical of their conduct without even thinking of their situation or putting yourself in their place.
- Review your work environment. Do you seek attention for your accomplishments? Humility is a wonderful quality, in my view the mark of a true leader that allows others a chance to shine, while you can be quietly confident about your own achievements when the focus is on colleagues.

- Analyze your weaknesses; accept that you’re not perfect and that you could work on some areas to make yourself a better person. Have the courage to look at yourself honestly and objectively.
- Examine how you react to stressful situations. Do you become upset every time something doesn’t happen the way you want? Do you blame others even when it’s not their fault? The ability to stay calm and in control in difficult situations is a highly valued asset in business.
- Do you take responsibility for your actions? Do you have the courage to apologize to a person if you hurt their feelings, or do you just try to ignore or avoid them, hoping it will be forgotten? An honest attempt to make things right will engender greater respect and forgiveness.
- Examine how your actions affect others. If you are in a position of authority, consider the impact of your decisions on others; put yourself in their place; try and consider how they will feel.
- How well do you respond to honest feedback or criticism? Consider whether you can be coached; in other words, will you be prepared to listen to feedback that you may not want to hear because they expose your flaws?

### How Can We Apply This to the Role of Corporate Secretary?

It hardly needs stating that the function of corporate secretaries as governance professionals in all types of organizations in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors has evolved. The modern corporate secretary is no longer an administrative officer, but is now expected to provide professional guidance to shareholders, boards, individual directors, management, and other stakeholders on the governance aspects of strategic decisions. The corporate secretary typically acts as a bridge for information, communication, advice, and arbitration between the board and management and between the organization and its shareholders and stakeholders.

To fulfill this role, the corporate secretary needs to be fully aware of the powers, rights, duties, and obligations of all of these groups, as well as a thorough knowledge of the business environment in which the organization operates; and a strong understanding of the laws, rules, and regulations that govern

its activities. Good governance is more than just complying with laws, regulations, standards, and codes; it is also about creating cultures of good practice. So what does this mean for the corporate secretary?

A critical component is having the technical skills and experience to know what corporate governance practices are needed in an organization and why; however, technical skills alone are insufficient. The corporate secretary is often called on to create and manage relationships between the different stakeholders in the corporate governance system. To be effective a corporate secretary needs to possess the following attributes:

- The highest standards of integrity and independence in protecting the interests of the organization and its stakeholders.
- A strong value system that enables them to perform their work ethically and with integrity, (sometimes termed as “spiritual intelligence”) and to be assertive enough not to compromise those values under pressure.
- When dealing with the strong personalities one often finds on boards, a corporate secretary needs to be respectful, diplomatic, and able to converse in an effective and assertive manner; this means being an active listener, appreciating the viewpoints of other parties and being respectful of confidences. I recall at one organization I worked for two fellow directors despised each other. After each meeting I would receive the inevitable phone call where A blasted B, followed by the next call in which B blasted A. As we all understood, I was not in a position to do anything about it, and in fairness they never asked. I was merely a sounding board to vent their frustrations.
- However, a corporate secretary should not be passive. If one is to work ethically, it means having the courage to bring issues to the surface, especially those relating to reputational risk. In my experience more and more secretaries have been called upon to present to board meetings on matters of governance and how it impacts the strategic direction of the company. This means that apart from possessing a deep knowledge of the business operations, the secretary must adopt a commercial and problem solving focus, and have the ability to generate and justify alternative solutions. They also need good presentation skills!
- Considering how corporate secretaries can get caught in the middle of the crossfire between a strong Chair and CEO, they may sometimes need to have a good survival instinct; political awareness, sensitivity to hidden agendas, tact and diplomacy, empathy with opposing viewpoints, and so often the case in these situations, the ability to tolerate severe stress.
- In a recent position as corporate secretary to a number of regulated boards, one of the key areas I was able to add value was in building a model for continuing director education. This meant getting to know each director’s personality and forging a strong relationship with them in order to effectively identify their specific development needs. I could then tailor their orientation and board education sessions to support them effectively. To do this, I needed to build credibility by a combination of technical prowess and more importantly relationship building skills.
- The corporate secretary should work with the board, especially the independent directors, to ensure that there is good chemistry between them and that they feel able to contribute effectively to the board. This will entail working with the Chair and CEO to ensure that there is plenty of opportunity for networking between the board members and also between the board and senior management.

### How Can we Manage and Influence the Powerful People in Your Life?

During my years as a corporate secretary I have come across many powerful and charismatic people, and I have learned, often through bitter experience, that they need special handling. I recently read a superb book *Influencing Powerful People* by Dirk Schlimm, and I highly recommend it. The book helped to put into context some of the concepts that it took me decades to learn (and am still learning) through trial and error. Below are some suggested strategies drawn from Schlimm’s book and my own experience.

- First impressions are critical. Appearance and demeanour are a good indicator of fit, and while you need to work hard over time to develop your credibility through being good at what you do, you can create a good impression merely by being likeable. Research the person and understand any specific skills or characteristics so that you are not meeting them ‘cold.’ As with any interaction with powerful people, preparation is key.

- Powerful people are extremely demanding. This may come as no surprise but that does not mean you have to jump to their every request. It is important they perceive you as competent, and that means becoming good at what you do. Equally you need to know your limits and not take on assignments that are beyond your abilities simply to please the boss. Your reputation for competence will soon take a hit.
- Powerful people don't always play by the rules of business protocol. I have found them to be highly passionate people, and that can result in an absence of filtering. Some bosses I have seen possess a volcanic temperament. Therefore an important attribute in dealing with such a person is the ability to 'roll with the punches;' to avoid the temptation to strike back and escalate the conflict. This does not mean being walked upon. The opportunity will undoubtedly arise to state your case at the appropriate time, when things are calmer and they are more amenable to what you have to say.
- Allied to this ability to take the hits is the need to be resilient to stress, to not allow the emotional toll to beat you. Save your energy for the battles you think you can win. This may be a judgment call but is worth the analysis. It's important that you look after yourself physically and mentally by eating, exercising and sleeping well. I also found that having a keen sense of humour was a huge stress relief. Laughter is a natural antidote to these stressful situations.
- Exercising a degree of humility in front of powerful people is often appreciated. This is about recognizing what those people bring to the table and being prepared to listen, understand and engage with them, a sure way to build a close relationship. Building that rapport will enable you to be confident enough to deliver bad news when the occasion arises. I have had to do that many times, but it is an opportunity to put things into context as well. Avoiding this difficult task to let someone else to do it loses that opportunity. Developing a strong relationship with the powerful person positions you well as a trusted adviser and influencer. However, humility means allowing your team to take the credit, not you, and being prepared to undertake menial tasks when the occasion demands it. I have carried a heavy suitcase up to the room for many a seasoned director.
- A powerful boss means that you will need to sharpen your influencing skills; however it is important to guard against compromising your independence or integrity. Your values and ethics must stand firm, even in the face of pressure to make snap decisions. This is to me the most important principle and hopefully one that will keep you out of jail!

### Conclusion

The situation I described at the beginning of the article eventually resolved itself when the Board voted to oust the CEO. More through luck than judgment, I managed to distance myself from his actions and was therefore not tainted by association. I survived with both my employment and my sanity intact, but only just.

The skills you learn as an emotionally intelligent person can be applied just as well to personal/family situations or even to social/networking settings. It is a valuable attribute that will enrich all areas of your professional and personal life.

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