

conversation with Peter Muldowney



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Every trustee, regardless of their role, has the power and responsibility to shape their board's culture and performance. Emotional intelligence, also known as emotional quotient (EQ), plays a critical role in this. "Culture is not shaped by policy; people shape it," said Peter Muldowney, senior vice president and head of institutional and multi-asset strategy at Connor, Clark & Lunn Financial Group. "Behaviours, attitudes and emotional responses influence the tone of the boardroom. By improving EQ across the group, boards can foster healthier dynamics, better decision making and more effective governance." Muldowney spoke with editor Tim Hennessy, GBA, about the challenges leaders face and the rewards of integrating EQ in the workplace.

How do you define EQ, and how do leaders demonstrate it in their roles?

EQ is about understanding, using and managing emotions in a positive manner, which can be achieved by communicating effectively, empathizing with others and being able to defuse conflicts.

Daniel Goleman, an expert in the field, presents a four-quadrant model for EQ:

- **Self-awareness:** Recognizing emotional triggers and tendencies in real time
- **Self-management:** Using strategies such as PAT (Pause, Acknowledge, Think) to regulate responses
- **Social awareness:** Listening with intent, observing nonverbal cues and practicing empathy
- **Relationship management:** Building trust through open communication, curiosity and consistency.

Goleman highlights that emotions are not just reactions; they are data. Understanding them helps leaders make more informed decisions, navigate conflicts effectively and foster stronger interpersonal connections.

How does understanding the roots of emotions help leaders improve their effectiveness?

Emotions are easier to understand when we explore how the brain works. Emotions and re-

actions involve the brain stem, the limbic system (the emotional centre) and the prefrontal cortex (the rational centre). The limbic system often reacts before the prefrontal cortex can respond.

Pausing before reacting encourages leaders to reflect on their emotional patterns, practise recognizing and naming emotions, and utilize techniques such as deep breathing and journaling to develop emotional literacy. This approach helps prevent operating on autopilot and encourages more intentional leadership.

What are examples of strategies that employers, trustees and administrators of benefit plans could use to apply EQ to their daily work?

When leaders demonstrate EQ, they foster collaboration, reduce conflict and elevate the quality of governance. Some strategies leaders can apply to strengthen their organizational culture include the following.

- **Decision journals:** Documenting feelings during key decisions and revisiting those reflections later can help identify emotional patterns and improve future responses.
- **Postmeeting reflections:** After each board meeting, trustees can take a moment to ask themselves, "How did I feel? What triggered that emotion? What can I do differently next time?" This builds emotional literacy and self-awareness.

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- **Why Am I Talking? (WAIT) technique:** WAIT is a simple but powerful reminder for trustees to pause before speaking and determine whether they have something relevant or new to share, especially in emotionally charged discussions. It promotes thoughtful contributions and reduces reactive dialogue.
- **Stay in Their Story (SITS) listening:** SITS encourages trustees to resist the urge to interrupt or relate everything back to their own experience. Instead, they focus on understanding the speaker's perspective.
- **Empathy in action:** By viewing behaviour like an iceberg, where visible actions are just the tip, trustees can better understand the underlying emotions or stress influencing another trustee's conduct.
- **Body language cues:** The use of open palms, eye contact and a relaxed posture can signal trust and attentiveness.
- **Emotional triggers and hijacking:** Recognizing when emotions are escalating (e.g., from annoyance to anger) allows trustees to intervene early, regulate their response and avoid regrettable reactions.

These practices are not just about personal growth; they are also about fostering a healthier and more effective board culture.

What challenges do organizations face when integrating EQ into the workplace?

While the benefits of EQ are clear, integrating it into boardroom culture is not without its challenges, such as the following.

- **Cultural resistance:** Some board environments may resist emotional awareness, viewing EQ as a "soft" or secondary factor.
- **Personal discomfort:** Discussing emotions or acknowledging vulnerability can feel uncomfortable.
- **Misinterpretation of signals:** Nonverbal cues can be misread, especially in virtual settings, where body language is more difficult to interpret.
- **Bias and assumptions:** Emotional responses can be influenced by unconscious biases, leading to misjudgments or unfair assessments of others.

- **Neurodiversity considerations:** Not all individuals express or interpret emotions in the same way. Boards must be mindful of neurodiverse members and avoid one-size-fits-all expectations.

Overcoming these challenges requires intentional effort; ongoing practice; and a shared commitment to fostering a culture of trust, empathy and openness.

What role will EQ play in shaping the workplace, and how might leaders be trained differently? Will it become a skill that employers prioritize in the future?

As leadership evolves in an increasingly complex and digital world, EQ is poised to play an even more critical role. Emerging trends shaping the future of EQ include the following.

- **Artificial intelligence and EQ integration:** As artificial intelligence becomes more embedded in decision making, leaders will need to balance data-driven insights with human empathy. EQ will be essential in interpreting artificial intelligence outputs and communicating them with nuance and care.
- **EQ in virtual and hybrid environments:** With remote work here to stay, leaders must develop new ways to read emotional cues and foster connection across screens. This includes mastering digital body language and creating space for emotional check-ins.
- **EQ as a core leadership competency:** Organizations are increasingly embedding EQ into leadership development programs, performance reviews and succession planning.

These trends signal a shift in viewing EQ from a "nice-to-have" to an essential trait for resilient, inclusive and high-performing leadership. As trustees, cultivating EQ means:

- Understanding and managing your own emotions
- Reading and responding to others with empathy.

Behaviours, attitudes and emotional responses influence the tone of the boardroom. By improving EQ across the group, boards can foster healthier dynamics, make better decisions and achieve more effective governance.