

Emotional Intelligence, Mindfulness and the Multigenerational Workforce

A report to the Senior Management Team

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1. Introduction

This report has been prepared for the Senior Management Team ahead of the strategic planning meeting in September 2026. Following the recent climate survey, senior leadership asked for an analysis of how emotional intelligence (EI) and mindfulness contribute to employee performance, leadership capability and recruitment. It is intended to inform decisions rather than to advocate for a particular training package.

Two things shape the argument that follows. First, EI is a useful idea, but the research behind it is more contested than most corporate training material admits, and the three best-known models do not measure the same thing. Second, the generational categories the SMT has asked about are widely used in practice but poorly supported by evidence. Simply repeating the popular claims would give leadership a false sense of certainty, so the analysis sets out what the evidence supports, what it does not, and where the limits lie.

Section 2 examines EI in the workplace, Section 3 the multigenerational workforce, Section 4 my own practice, and Section 5 sets out five recommendations.

2. Emotional intelligence in the workplace

2.1 Defining emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence was originally defined as “the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions” (Salovey and Mayer, 1990, p. 189). Goleman (1996) popularised the concept for a management audience and is largely responsible for its presence in leadership development today.

The field is usually divided into three streams: ability models measured by performance tests, self-report measures of the same abilities, and mixed models combining emotional skills with traits and motivational qualities (O'Boyle et al., 2011). This distinction matters more than it first appears. A manager who says “we should recruit for EI” is making a very different claim depending on which stream is meant, since the three predict workplace outcomes at different strengths.

A related distinction is between ability EI and trait EI. Trait emotional intelligence concerns self-perceptions of emotional abilities and overlaps more closely with established personality traits (Petrides and Furnham, 2001). This helps explain why the same employee can score quite differently on two questionnaires that both claim to measure emotional intelligence.

2.2 Comparing three models of emotional intelligence

Goleman's framework identifies self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill. Its strength is practical: each element translates into observable managerial

behaviour, which is why it dominates workplace training. Its weakness is that it is a mixed model. It absorbs qualities such as achievement drive and optimism that psychologists would classify as personality traits, so it risks relabelling conscientiousness as emotional intelligence and claiming credit for outcomes conscientiousness already explained.

Mayer, Salovey and Caruso's (2004) ability model is the most rigorous of the three, treating EI as four related abilities: perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitate thought, understanding emotion, and managing emotion. Because it is assessed through performance items rather than self-description it is harder to fake, which makes it the only one that could defensibly inform selection. Its limitation is that scoring often depends on consensus about the "correct" emotional answer, which is culturally variable, and its correlations with job performance tend to be smaller than those reported for mixed models.

Bar-On's (2006) emotional-social intelligence model is broader again, covering intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability and general mood. It suits employee development and wellbeing work because it treats emotional functioning as part of overall coping. However, it relies on self-report and overlaps with measures of wellbeing and personality, so a high score may partly reflect how positive somebody feels that day rather than a stable capability.

The practical conclusion for the SMT is that the models suit different purposes and are not interchangeable. Goleman's framework is a reasonable common language for development conversations, Bar-On's model suits wellbeing programmes, and only ability-based assessment has the psychometric standing to inform recruitment, and even then it should never be the deciding factor.

2.3 Emotional intelligence and communication

The clearest workplace application of EI is in communication. Perceiving and understanding emotion allows an employee to read tone, hesitation and non-verbal signals, and to avoid the common error of reading a colleague's short reply as hostility when it reflects workload or anxiety. This reduces the number of small misunderstandings that consume management time.

Empathy also changes how information is delivered. Feedback framed around the recipient's likely reaction, rather than only the sender's intention, is more likely to be acted on and less likely to trigger defensiveness. This is not merely politeness: O'Boyle et al. (2011) found that all three streams of EI predicted job performance and added explanatory value beyond both cognitive ability and the Big Five personality factors, although the effect sizes were modest rather than transformative.

2.4 Emotional intelligence and conflict management

Conflict is where self-regulation earns its place. Joseph and Newman (2010) proposed a cascading model in which emotional perception feeds emotional understanding, which in turn enables regulation. Applied to a disagreement at work, this is the difference between reacting and responding: a manager who notices rising irritation, understands what triggered it and regulates the impulse to answer immediately can steer the conversation towards the problem rather than the person.

Empathy contributes differently. Understanding what the other party actually needs, rather than what they are demanding, makes an integrative rather than a purely distributive resolution possible, so both parties leave with something and the working relationship survives.

A qualification is needed here. Emotional abilities do not in themselves guarantee ethical behaviour. The same skills that help a manager read a colleague's discomfort and calm a dispute could in principle be used to pressure that colleague instead. This does not make emotional intelligence harmful, and the evidence above associates it with positive outcomes. It does suggest that organisations should develop EI alongside clear ethical expectations, rather than treating it as a competence that is good by definition.

2.5 Emotional intelligence, leadership and psychological safety

The SMT has specifically asked about psychological safety, which Edmondson (1999, p. 354) defined as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking”. Frazier et al. (2017) meta-analysed this literature and found psychological safety related to information sharing, learning behaviour, engagement and task performance, with leader behaviour and a supportive work context among its main antecedents. The CIPD (2024) evidence review found consistent links between psychological safety and voice behaviour, team learning and error reporting, and identified leader behaviour as the strongest single influence on whether it develops.

This is where EI becomes an organisational rather than an individual matter. Psychological safety is built or destroyed in small moments: how a manager reacts the first time somebody raises a problem, admits a mistake or disagrees in a meeting. A visible flash of irritation teaches a team not to speak again, and no policy document will undo that lesson. Self-regulation here is not a personal virtue but a requirement for organisational learning.

There is a limit worth noting. The CIPD review is clear that psychological safety is not the same as comfort, and that safety without accountability produces complacency rather than performance. The leadership skill is holding both at once.

2.6 Emotional intelligence and decision-making

Emotions carry information. Unease about a supplier or discomfort during a negotiation often reflects pattern recognition that has not yet reached conscious articulation. Employees with good emotional awareness can treat that signal as something to test, rather than dismissing it or acting on it uncritically.

Equally, emotion shapes judgement. Strong emotions such as anger or anxiety can influence how risks, responsibilities and possible outcomes are interpreted. An emotionally aware decision-maker can recognise that a current mood is influencing a judgement and delay accordingly. The important qualification is that EI addresses affective interference only. It does not correct cognitive biases such as anchoring or confirmation bias, and it would be misleading to present it to the SMT as a general remedy for poor decisions.

2.7 Mindfulness: what the evidence actually supports

Mindfulness is often offered alongside EI, and the two are related in that sustained attention to present experience supports emotional awareness and regulation. The evidence base, however, needs reading carefully.

Bartlett et al. (2019) meta-analysed randomised controlled trials of workplace mindfulness training and found meaningful improvements in perceived stress, anxiety, psychological distress, wellbeing and sleep, but concluded that the data on work performance were too limited to support any conclusion. More recently, Vainre et al. (2025) synthesised 99 randomised trials involving 16,054 participants. Mindfulness-based programmes improved task performance against passive control groups, but the improvement disappeared against active control groups, where participants received an alternative activity of similar structure and attention.

That second finding is the important one for a strategic planning meeting. It suggests part of the benefit organisations observe may come from giving employees protected time and attention rather than from mindfulness specifically. Mindfulness should therefore be funded as a wellbeing measure, where the evidence is reasonably strong, and not sold internally as a productivity intervention, where it is weak.

2.8 A critical view of the evidence

Three limitations should be stated plainly. First, measurement is inconsistent, so studies using different instruments are not easily comparable. Second, most workplace EI research is cross-sectional and self-reported, which makes causal claims difficult: employees who perform well may simply describe themselves more favourably. Third, self-report measures are vulnerable to faking, which is a decisive objection to using them in recruitment.

None of this means EI should be dismissed. It means claims about it should be proportionate to the evidence, and an organisation adopting it should build in its own evaluation rather than rely on vendor figures.

3. Managing a multigenerational workforce

3.1 How the three generations are usually described

Generation X, born roughly between 1965 and 1980, is typically described as independent, pragmatic and sceptical of institutions, having entered work before digital tools were standard. Generation Y, or Millennials, born between about 1981 and 1996, are described as collaborative, feedback-seeking and motivated by purpose. Generation Z, born from roughly 1997, are described as digital-first, direct in communication and attentive to mental health and transparency.

Practitioner survey data lends some support to these portraits. Deloitte's (2025) survey of 23,482 Gen Z and Millennial respondents across 44 countries found that these groups are expected to make up around three-quarters of the global workforce by 2030 and are pursuing a combination of money, meaning and wellbeing. Only a small minority of Gen Z respondents identified reaching a leadership position as their main career goal, while work-life balance and learning ranked higher, and around four in ten reported feeling stressed or anxious most of the time.

Rothschadl (2025) argues along similar lines that generational background shapes how emotions are expressed and regulated at work, with older employees tending towards more structured self-regulation and younger employees more comfortable with open expression.

3.2 What the research evidence says

The academic evidence is much less supportive than the practitioner literature. Ravid, Costanza and Romero (2025) meta-analysed the generations literature and found few systematic or meaningful differences between generational groups across workplace outcomes, then examined why the literature nonetheless continues to suggest that such differences exist.

Rudolph et al. (2021) go further, rejecting ten common myths about generations in organisational science. Their central objection is methodological: generation, age and historical period are confounded, so a difference between a fifty-year-old and a twenty-five-year-old today could reflect the era they were born into, their stage of life and career, or current conditions, and cross-sectional data cannot separate these. Rudolph and Zacher (2022) argue the concept should be retired from organisational research altogether.

This creates a tension for managers, because generational language is embedded in everyday workplace conversation. The resolution is not to pretend differences are imaginary but to be precise about what is actually being observed, which is usually career stage, life stage and exposure to technology rather than birth cohort as such.

3.3 Where real differences do appear

Certain frictions are observable regardless of cause. Communication preference is the most obvious: some employees expect rapid, informal messaging, while others treat a meeting or an email as the proper channel for anything important. Feedback expectations differ, with continuous informal feedback preferred by some and periodic formal review by others. Expectations of transparency around pay and values appear higher among younger employees, and technological adaptability varies more by role and recent exposure than by cohort.

Motivation is the clearest example of why this matters. Employees differ in what they are working for. Some want progression and responsibility, some are focused on financial reward, some need flexibility around family or study, some value the chance to learn something new, and some care most about work that feels meaningful to them. Deloitte (2025) reports that money, meaning and wellbeing are pursued together rather than separately, which suggests motivation is a mixture rather than a single driver. These priorities also shift as circumstances change, so the same person may want different things at different points in their career. Managers therefore need to check what motivates each individual directly, rather than infer it from age, because a wrong assumption here feeds into pay conversations, task allocation and promotion decisions.

These are real operational issues. The point is that they are individual preferences which correlate loosely with age, not fixed properties of a birth cohort, and are better handled by asking than by assuming.

3.4 Applying emotional intelligence and mindfulness to recruitment, management and retention

In recruitment, the main contribution of EI is to the interviewer rather than the candidate. Structured questions combined with attention to one's own reactions reduce similarity bias, the tendency to rate candidates who resemble the interviewer more highly. Self-report EI questionnaires should not be used as selection filters, for the reasons in Section 2.8. Job advertisements should also avoid generational language such as “digital native”, which risks indirect age discrimination under the Equality Act 2010 as well as narrowing the applicant pool (Great Britain, 2010).

In day-to-day management, mindfulness supports the pause between stimulus and response that self-regulation depends on. A manager who notices irritation at a request for flexible hours, and waits before answering, is more likely to judge the request on its merits. Perspective-taking checks stereotype: before concluding that a younger colleague is disengaged, the better response is to ask what is happening. Teams should also agree communication norms explicitly, since assumed norms default to whatever the most senior person prefers.

In retention, the Deloitte (2025) findings point to the line manager. Respondents reported a gap between the support they expected from managers and what they received, and identified recognition and workload as contributors to stress. Since these are areas where empathy and self-regulation operate directly, investment in manager capability may make an important contribution to retention, particularly where workload, recognition and managerial support are significant concerns.

3.5 Generational difference as both an advantage and a problem

Age diversity can strengthen a team's emotional functioning. A group containing different life stages holds a wider range of responses to pressure, and reverse mentoring, where younger staff support older colleagues with technology and receive guidance in return, builds empathy in both directions. Diversity also forces communication norms to be made explicit, which usually improves them.

The negative effects mostly come from stereotyping rather than from difference itself. Labelling a group as entitled or resistant to change is an attribution error that reduces the accuracy of empathy, because the manager stops observing the individual and predicts from the category instead. Such narratives damage psychological safety, since nobody speaks freely to somebody who has already decided what they are like. There is also a discrimination risk, since management strategies differentiated by generation can amount to age-based treatment in practice (Great Britain, 2010).

4. Applying this to my own professional practice

Running Renoir Coffee has made the practical value of these ideas visible to me. A recent example involved a wholesale order of thirty kilograms of coffee, of which four to five kilograms arrived in damaged bags. The customer had already paid and was angry when he contacted me. I resolved it immediately: I told him to keep the damaged bags, since the coffee was still usable, and that I would send four new bags at no additional cost. He was satisfied and the working relationship was preserved.

Read against Section 2.4, the useful part was that I responded to the problem rather than to his tone, and the outcome was integrative rather than distributive: he kept the usable coffee and I

kept the account. Reviewing it now, though, I can see a weakness. I moved to a solution so quickly that I never asked what had caused the damage or whether the carrier was responsible. The speed protected the relationship, but it also spared me a more uncomfortable conversation, and the same fault could easily happen on the next delivery. Section 2.6 is relevant here: the urge to make the complaint go away was itself an emotional response, and noticing an emotion is not the same as managing it.

Two things I intend to apply deliberately rather than occasionally. The first is the pause between stimulus and response described in Section 2.4, which in the case above would have made room for one further question. The second is checking an assumption about a colleague before acting on it, since Section 3.3 convinced me that much of what looks like a difference in character is a difference in preference nobody has asked about.

Preparing this report has also changed one belief. I had assumed generational differences were established fact and would have managed a mixed-age team on that basis. I now treat those categories as a hypothesis to check with the individual, which means asking a new member of staff how they prefer to receive feedback rather than inferring it from their age. Because Section 2.8 shows that self-report is unreliable, I also intend to note briefly what happened after difficult conversations, since my memory will probably flatter me.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Emotional intelligence has a measurable relationship with workplace performance, communication and leadership, but the relationship is moderate rather than dramatic and depends heavily on which model is used. Mindfulness has good evidence for wellbeing and much weaker evidence for productivity. Generational categories, despite their popularity, are not well supported by research, and managing by them carries practical and legal risk. On this basis I recommend that the Senior Management Team:

1. Invest in emotional intelligence as a development activity for managers, and do not use self-report EI questionnaires as recruitment filters.
2. Offer mindfulness as a voluntary wellbeing programme, evaluated against wellbeing and stress measures rather than promised productivity gains.
3. Prioritise training managers in the behaviours that build psychological safety, since the evidence identifies leader behaviour as the strongest lever and the climate survey suggests this is where our recent improvement came from.
4. Replace generational segmentation in recruitment and people policy with structured conversations about individual preferences on communication, feedback, motivation and flexibility, and remove age-coded language from job advertisements.

5. Collect internal before-and-after data on any programme adopted, so future decisions rest on our own evidence rather than vendor claims.

This report has two main limitations. It relies on published research rather than primary data from our own organisation, and the practitioner sources in Section 3 are commercially produced and should be weighed accordingly. A short internal study of communication and feedback preferences would address both, and I would be glad to assist with it.

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