



THE DARK SIDE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

In little more than 15 years, emotional intelligence (EI) has morphed from a snappy title for a business book into an essential management attribute for anyone who wants to shin up the greasy pole faster than the also-rans. Smart, user-friendly and considerate of lesser mortals, EI has become the leadership tool for aspiring CEOs everywhere.

Based on the deceptively simple premise that a little empathy goes a long way, EI's basic principles – noticing, understanding, and managing one's own and other's emotions – have been employed by legions of managers worldwide looking to motivate teams, boost bottom lines and create more vigorous organisations. And while academics still debate the exact definition of emotional intelligence, the HR and consulting world has lost no time jumping on what has proved to be a lucrative and successful bandwagon. EI courses, seminars, conferences and training programmes now abound, and some companies have embraced the idea so completely that they actively recruit and promote based on EI scores.

However, a new report by Professor Martin Kilduff and Dr Jochen Menges at Cambridge's Judge Business School and Assistant Professor Dan Chiaburu at the Mays Business School in Texas, argues convincingly that there may be a dark side to emotional intelligence, one that can be used to manipulate, spin, intimidate and generally bend others to one's will.

'We wanted to ask, how would humans apply these [EI] skills in competitive, rather than co-operative environments,' says



Emotional intelligence has become an industry in itself – it's effective, morale-boosting and good for business. But what happens when people start using it to manipulate others in order to further their own careers? By REBECCA ALEXANDER

co-author Menges, lecturer in human resources and organisations at Judge. 'What if people want to get ahead rather than get along?' EI is a powerful technique, say the authors, but it has the potential for misuse.

This dark-side research may be in its infancy, but it chimes with the experience of many business leaders. Says Lord (Digby) Jones, former head of the CBI: 'It happens all the time. Some people are Machiavellian and use every trick in the book. They use other people, try to climb over them to get to the top.'

Nicola Horlick, chief executive of Bramdean Asset Management, used to be called the City superwoman and has had dealings with more than her fair share of the devious characters who people the Square Mile. 'There's no doubt that there are many who manipulate their way to the top. It's human nature – an extension of office politics. And there are some organisations where that behaviour really is the modus operandi.'

So if EI really is just a tool that can be used for good or ill, depending on the motives of the protagonist, what might the dark side of EI look like? The report's authors list four core EI skills (based on Mayer and Salovey's original 1997 model of EI) and suggest four shadowy tactics that match them closely. So, perceiving the emotions of oneself and others, using EI in one's thinking and decision-making, understanding and describing emotions, and managing one's own and others' emotions can also be used, the authors suggest, for strategic emotion detection, disguising and expressing emotions

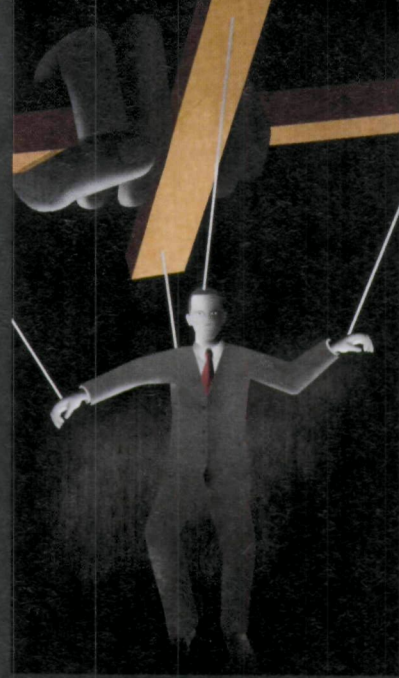
for personal gain, using misattribution to stir and shape emotion, and, one of the most sinister, controlling the flow of emotion-laden communication.

For the first, strategic emotion detection, the researchers suggest that those who misuse EI will scrutinise colleagues for clues about their emotional state, using their well-honed emotional antennae to pick up on a range of non-verbal clues. Of course, this isn't exactly new – it's human nature to check out how those around us are feeling. But the more nakedly self-serving will focus on those who are most important to them, and use the information they glean to their own advantage. They may appear to be empathising with their colleagues, but in reality the opposite is the case. 'Other people's emotions are neglected,' says Menges. 'Supervisors and rivals are important, and those high in dark EI will also focus on subordinates' emotions, but only to the extent that they're helpful or relevant to them. Which doesn't make for a particularly pleasant environment.'

So, bosses with negative EI in mind may focus on their employees' emotions for a short time only, perhaps for the cynical purpose of gauging how to make them feel more like going the extra mile when quick results are needed. Whereas employees looking to profit by dark EI may constantly scrutinise their superiors' emotions, looking for ways to work their way up in their estimation by seeming mysteriously attuned to their state of mind. Rivals are also closely observed for clues regarding their status in the organisation, and to work out whether they are allies or potential threats.

Emotion detection, say the researchers, is particularly prevalent at critical periods – for example, during appraisals, bonus time or redundancy announcements. According to Horlick, things can get particularly ugly when bonuses or promotions are in the offing. 'People work themselves into a frenzy,' she says. 'There is intense anxiety – people are looking around the room, trying to work out what's going to happen to everyone else.' And it's just a short step from there to undermining colleagues in front of the boss. 'Some try to take credit for things that weren't really their work, or they talk people down,' says Horlick. 'They say things like: "I should be getting more pay because, frankly, X, Y and Z are useless."' Such a bald approach generally backfires, of course – even the least emotionally intelligent manager can see through such blatant tactics. But the researchers argue that the more well-coached EI practitioners are, the more subtle their approach is – the real experts will build on the bonds they've established with their boss to quietly insinuate that certain colleagues aren't up to scratch.

Just as those on the dark side of EI will scrutinise the emotions of others, so they are adept at controlling their own emotional displays. Like a good poker player, they can disguise inner turmoil with a neutral face, or smile convincingly when dealt a hopeless hand.



'I use silence to keep my people under my control. It makes them anxious and fearful'

This, of course, is one of the main reasons why EI has become so popular with business leaders, who often find themselves in such situations. A master performer can convincingly express strong beliefs he doesn't really hold, just to get ahead.

Menges' paper cites the example of John Gutfreund, a Wall Street legend who also featured heavily in Michael Lewis's 1989 book *Liar's Poker*. As a partner at Salomon Brothers in the 1970s, Gutfreund set his sights on the chairmanship. At a critical meeting of Salomon partners, he delivered an impassioned argument as to why the company should remain a private partnership, rather than become a publicly held corporation, as his arch-rival was proposing. The then chairman, William Salomon, later commented that it was this conviction that persuaded him to pick Gutfreund as his eventual successor. But three years later, Gutfreund revealed his hand, selling Salomon to a commodity dealer, pocketing a handy \$40m in the process.

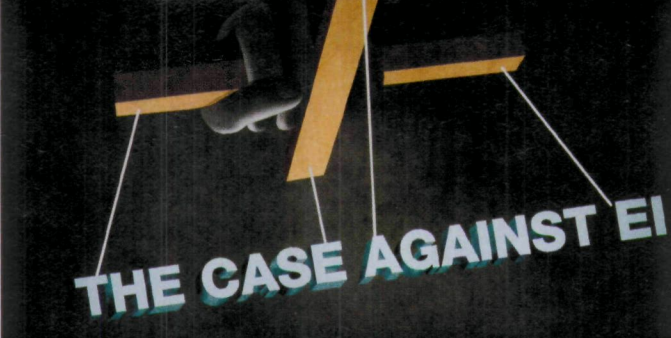
It's a story that might give all those firms that have been busily equipping their top teams with world-class EI skills pause for thought. Doubtless, their efforts mostly produce the squeaky-clean Luke Skywalker types that they intend – but if even one leader-in-waiting ends up defecting to the Dark Side as Darth Vader in disguise, it could be a disaster. The report doesn't go this far, but it's not unreasonable to speculate that dark EI might play a role in the 'success' of corporate criminals like

Bernie Madoff, Bernie Ebbers and Ken Lay. There is certainly no shortage of hoodwinked former colleagues to attest to the manipulative powers possessed by all three.

Those who are skilled at emotional manipulation are also able to stir and shape others' emotions, while all the time appearing to be a sympathetic listener. Beware the charming colleague who listens supportively to your account of an ambiguous performance review. His sympathy may mask his intent to help you interpret your manager's verdict in a way that suits him, underlining the negatives and dismissing the positives. This strategic empathising can be used to unbalance anyone seen as a threat to the perpetrator.

The negative use of emotional intelligence isn't limited to one-to-one encounters. Those who are skilled at gaining the trust of can also use that ability to occupy a central position within a company's social or communications network – giving them unrivalled control over the flow of information and gossip. The benefits are obvious – they can stoke criticism of rivals, encourage positive reviews of allies, and polish their own reputation as an honest broker. Says Menges: 'Emotions are aroused but can't be traced back to them. They control the information flow without this being ascribed to them.'

The levers of control are different for managers and employees. Managers may withhold information, or employ 'supervisory silence' – a deadly weapon. You'll know you've been targeted if you find yourself shut out from important



THE CASE AGAINST EI

For decades, intelligence was seen as straightforward. People did well or badly in tests, and psychologists believed that the difference must be down to one common factor – our level of intelligence.

Then in the 1980s, the concept of multiple intelligences was introduced, paving the way for intelligence beyond the academic kind. Not long after, Daniel Goleman, then a science reporter at the *New York Times*, stumbled across research on 'emotional intelligence' by psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer, who defined it as a 'subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions'. Realising its potential, Goleman wrote the book that in 1995 propelled EI into the mainstream and provided him with a brand-new career: *Emotional*

Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ. It garnered him a *Time* magazine cover, 18 months on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and a lucrative deal with global HR consultancy the Hay Group. More books followed, including *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (1998), *The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace* (2001) and *Social Intelligence, the New Science of Social Relationships* (2006).

The notion that people could readily boost their emotional literacy made EI a seductive concept, and soon EI was championed as a way to improve relationships, be a better parent, a better student, and, crucially, a better leader, salesperson, manager and teamplayer. Claims abounded that emotionally intelligent workers sold more and handled adversity better.

Yet there are major issues

around EI's validity – not least its definition. At least 15 different models of EI exist, covering attributes such as self-motivation, optimism, conscientiousness, trustworthiness, and many others that weren't in the original EI brief. Most academics prefer a narrower definition, but the more skills EI covers, the easier it is to sell.

And despite the abundance of EI/EQ tests, training days, conferences, webinars and books, there is still dispute over how to measure EI and its impact on the bottom line. Says Robert McHenry, chairman and CEO of OPP, the business psychology consultancy: 'Most researchers have little good to say about the use of EI in job selection.' Not only has the science been found lacking, some critics claim it's possible to fake the tests to get a good EI score. As one critique puts it:

'The ratio of hyperbole to hard evidence is rather high.' And that's not even mentioning the criticism of Goleman himself, who has made a fortune from EI but has come under fire from academics for an insufficiently scientific approach.

EI has encouraged managers to improve their people skills and raise their awareness of emotional issues at work. But caveat emptor remains, as always, good advice. Robert Sternberg, a respected expert in the field of intelligence, writes: 'The positive side of the [EI] movement is that it helps broaden our concept of intelligence and gets us away from the common fixation on IQ-based or IQ-related measures. The negative side of the movement is that it is often crass, profit-driven, and socially and scientifically irresponsible.'

meetings and not cc'd on emails. 'I use silence to keep my people under my control,' one vice-president is quoted as saying in Menges' report. 'It keeps them anxious and fearful. I don't care if they don't like it. I like it.'

Ostracism can be used to destabilise, or to bring someone back in line, and was apparently practised to great effect by Gordon Brown when first appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer. According to insiders, Brown barely set foot in the Treasury for his first weeks, preferring to hold meetings on his own turf with select MPs and a few key civil service allies.

But information flow is a two-way street. Employees can exert a powerful influence over what a boss does. Anything that reflects badly on them can be filtered out, praise for the boss can be exaggerated, and bad news downplayed. And, of course, those close to the leader can pass on his or her comments to colleagues, adding whatever spin they like to achieve a particular result.

All of which adds up to something of a cautionary tale for EI enthusiasts. Says Menges: 'If organisations use EI abilities as selection or promotion criteria, they need to know they sharpen the weapons but they haven't said what fight the weapons are being sharpened for. It might actually cause problems they don't anticipate.'

But before you scramble to cancel your corporate EI programme, it's worth knowing that the proposers of dark EI believe that emotional intelligence has a lot going for it.

'Emotionally intelligent people are good for you in the right environment,' says Menges. The point being, of course, that it's not EI per se that is the issue, but rather what you do with it, and that both employers and employees need to be aware of the potential for skulduggery.

No research has yet been done into how to stop the misuse of EI, but the report's authors reckon a really good dark-arts player is nearly impossible to spot. So, those wanting to smoke out an acolyte of the dark side will have to rely on their instincts. Says Nicola Horlick: 'When I was running very large businesses, it was up to me to identify people who behaved in this way and to tell them it wasn't acceptable. They always initially fight back and deny it, but you need to lead from the front and make it clear that's not the sort of behaviour that will be rewarded. You've got to set the boundaries and people will soon realise that abiding by those rules is how they get ahead.'

Alternatively, you can recognise the reality that people don't tend to check in their less desirable character traits at reception; they bring them to work with them. And part of the challenge of leadership is dealing with the consequences. 'When you throw highly charged, highly intelligent people together in pursuit of profit, you're going to get use and abuse of EI,' says Digby Jones. 'It happens all the time. You're never going to stop it. What you need are good leaders who can identify it and turn it to an advantage.' ■

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