



# FROM TECHNICAL PROFESSIONAL TO LEADER – THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

## Who are technical professionals?

### Technical professionals are the experts behind the scenes.

They are individuals who have spent years developing in-depth knowledge in their field. Their skills and expertise often shape how an organisation is seen in the market; strong reputations are built as customers trust the consistent results that expertise delivers. Many organisations simply couldn't operate without them; they are the technical backbone of the business. Technical Professionals enjoy solving complex problems, love a challenge, and take pride in using their knowledge to make a real impact.

### What's the problem?

A problem for organisations and for the technical professional themselves is in bringing those qualities into successful leadership. Today's organisations are less top-down and have fewer layers of management, so the 'jump' from individual contributor to leader is perhaps greater. In this environment, leadership isn't about always being right

or knowing how to solve every problem. Rather, it is about working with others, trusting your team, and getting things done through collaboration and delegation.

As a technical professional looks to make the jump to leadership, emotional intelligence skills like self-awareness, empathy, and communication are just as important, if not more important, as technical skills. So, what is Emotional Intelligence (EQ)?

In 1990, psychologists Salovey and Mayer introduced the term "emotional intelligence." They described it as the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions, recognise the emotions of others, and use this awareness to guide how you think and act.

Later in 1995, American psychologist and author Daniel Goleman built on their work and popularised the idea in his book Emotional Intelligence. He argued that success in business isn't just about IQ, but also about EQ, Emotional Intelligence.

**According to Goleman, emotionally intelligent people have four key qualities:**

- Self-awareness - understanding your emotions, strengths, weaknesses, as well as how they impact you and your team. You must first understand yourself in order to assist others.
- Self-management - is the capacity to regulate your feelings, particularly under pressure, and maintain your optimism in the face of adversity. Emotionally intelligent people think things through, take a deep breath, and decide how to respond instead of responding on impulse. This enables them to manage stress in a composed and considerate manner.
- Social awareness - knowing what's going on around you and how other people feel. Effective leaders are empathetic and attentive to the emotions of their team. They are better able to support their team and collaborate with others as a result.
- Relationship management - they are adept at managing social interactions and relationships.

## The challenge for technical professionals

Technical professionals typically focus on processes and goals, value technical knowledge and respect expertise. Their long and usually academic training rarely taught them how to manage or lead people; as a result, they may place less value on 'soft' skills.

They are used to working as individual contributors with like-minded people who share their jargon, culture, and thought processes. As a result, they may struggle to communicate effectively with business decision-makers.



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The qualities and strengths that make technical professionals valuable in technical roles often differ from those needed for leadership.

- Deep specialised knowledge versus strategic, visionary, and big-picture thinking.
- Individual contribution versus teamwork and people management.
- Leading via direction and expertise versus mentoring, coaching and enabling others.

With a preference for a pacesetter style of leadership, TPs set high performance standards and expect the same from those around them (Goleman 2003). While this can drive results in motivated and capable teams, it can also overwhelm those who are less self-sufficient, limiting growth and lowering morale. It can also create dependency, leaving the team feeling lost or uncertain about how to proceed without their expert leadership, or afraid to 'get it wrong'.

Feedback is often poorly timed or limited, and when others fall behind, technical professionals may step in too quickly. This can create confusion or frustration, as the intention behind their feedback or actions doesn't always match the impact it has on others.

## How does coach-mentoring make a difference?

If we want TPs to be great leaders, then we must be clear and consistent in communicating 'what good looks like.' Being skilled in technical matters is expected, but building strong relationships is just as important. That means connecting with their team, working well with others across the business, and building strong relationships with clients, while recognising the impact their personal growth has on the broader system they contribute to. Developing their emotional intelligence, alongside their technical ability, is central.

At the core of emotional intelligence is self-awareness. If someone doesn't understand their own motivations and actions, it's hard for them to understand others. Without self-awareness, it's also tough to think clearly and use technical skills effectively.



That said, TPs generally have an appetite for learning and can (and do) develop into exceptional leaders. Therefore, how we position coaching needs careful consideration. The first step is helping TPs see that emotional intelligence is just as important as technical skills when it comes to being an effective leader. TPs often prefer fact-based ideas and clear answers, so introducing concepts like brain science or neuroplasticity can be helpful, as it demonstrates that the brain can change and grow over time.

As coaches, an important part of our role is to demonstrate helpful behaviours. This includes building trust and connection, using clear and simple language, and truly listening, without jumping in to offer advice or solve problems. When we listen without judgment and give (or receive) constructive feedback, we create an environment where "behaviour breeds behaviour". This helps technical professionals learn better ways to communicate and build stronger relationships.

It is also very important to support TPs in realising that "one size doesn't fit all". Rather, the most effective leaders are flexible and able to adjust their style according to the situation, the people involved, and the context, while remaining true to themselves.

By learning to adapt their approach with self-awareness and practice, technical professionals can build on their existing strengths and develop new skills. This growth helps them move beyond unhelpful habits and adopt more effective behaviours, opening the door to stronger relationships, clearer communication, and more impactful leadership.

Goleman, D. (1995), Emotional Intelligence, New York: Bantam.

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Salovey, P and Mayer, J. D. (1990), 'Emotional Intelligence', Imagination, Cognition, and Personality, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 185 –211.

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