

Build your emotional intelligence

Navigate uncertainty, cultivate resilience, inspire excellence.

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ing and healthcare. Developing EI and soft skills helps prepare leaders to show up for their teams and communicate effectively. (See *EI improvement strategies*.)

EI: An overview

Elfenbein and Goleman and colleagues define EI as the aptitude each individual has to manage their own emotions while also understanding and working with other people's emotions. Findings by Goleman and colleagues focus on five aspects of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. According to their research, the exact success statistic contributed to by EI remains unknown, but intelligence quotient accounts for only 20% of life success; however, the authors don't define success. These findings underscore that EI isn't just important, but it's twice as important for jobs compared to other abilities, such as technical skills, especially at the leadership level when those skills no longer play a role in day-to-day workflow.

Strong EI helps nursing leaders understand the emotions of those around them, whether in a one-on-one meeting, a staff meeting, or in patient care settings. It enables them to gauge the effectiveness of their messages, engagement, and stakeholder receptivity. Moreover, EI facilitates the identification of differing opinions and encourages the pursuit of diverse perspectives. Obtaining varied viewpoints contributes to informed decision-making and a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues in the healthcare arena.

As a nurse leader (or as you prepare to become one), you can follow several strategies to improve your EI. Take time for self-reflection, seek feedback, enlist a mentor, and improve your communication skills.

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IN A DYNAMIC, ever-evolving world flooded with resources aiming to refine leadership capabilities, the challenge lies in discerning which avenues genuinely contribute to effective leadership. Simon Sinek's *Start with Why*, Stephen Denning's narrative prowess, Brené Brown's exploration of vulnerability and courage, and John Maxwell's emphasis on asking great questions all touch on the domain of emotional intelligence (EI)—even if not directly.

This underlying thread of EI centers on cultivating soft skills, particularly in communication and relationship-building, which directly impact the teams and people we lead in nurs-

Take time for self-reflection

Several authors (Coleman and colleagues, Denning, Dye and Garman, Northouse, and Sinek) note the importance of self-reflection as a cornerstone intervention for improving EI and communication. Self-reflection can involve daily reflection questions, contemplation of your values, or reflecting on past presentations or interactions. The literature encourages regular daily self-reflection as a transformative habit to enable greater self-awareness, build empathy, improve self-regulation, and heighten social skills—all critical components of EI. This consistency within the literature allows you to select a self-reflection method that aligns with your preferences or specific needs.

Self-reflection provides an opportunity to evaluate your emotions and the dynamics of various situations. Through this self-analysis, you can assess the root causes of your feelings and critically analyze your interactions. As emphasized by Sinek, self-reflection also serves as a tool to probe the essence of your “why” or your personal values.

A clear understanding of personal values enhances comprehension of the motivations behind your actions, which fosters greater self-awareness. Knowledge of your values also allows for pairing passion with purpose. As a nursing leader, you must articulate these values to colleagues and those you lead to ensure organizational alignment and pivotal steps in developing a clear and compelling leadership direction. This communication gains even more significance when you engage in self-reflection to understand and convey your personal values, thereby inspiring teams and fostering a cohesive and values-driven environment. Leaders must recognize that actions misaligned with stated values breed distrust among followers, leading to decreased buy-in when initiatives or changes occur.

Naming emotions, especially those beyond traditional anger, sadness, or happiness labels, during self-reflection can help broaden EI. According to Yu and colleagues, the ability to name emotions accurately (your own or others) fosters greater trust among colleagues and higher-quality relationships. It also provides you with a greater understanding of the cause of the emotions, which can enhance regulation. Yu and colleagues theorize that naming another's emotions communicates a willingness to go beyond your own personal needs. Goleman and collaborators echo similar findings.

EI improvement strategies

Consider the following strategies for enhancing your emotional intelligence (EI) as a nursing leader:

Self-reflection

- Journal to better understand yourself, your emotions, and your motivations.
- Work with a feedback partner for daily interactions and presentations.
- Discover personal values or your “why.”
- Improve your emotional vocabulary.

Seek feedback

- Seek formal and informal feedback from peers and staff.
- “Read the room” during meetings and one-on-one interactions; address what you’re interpreting.
- Provide feedback to peers and staff.

Obtain a mentor

Work with a mentor to accomplish the following:

- Develop communication and leadership skills.
- Ensure accountability.
- Provide feedback.
- Guide problem solving.

The practice of self-reflection to cultivate self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy serves as a vital first step in improving EI. As a leader, you must understand the interconnection of self-awareness and empathy. In addition, understanding yourself and your motivations can help you effectively understand and empathize with others. With self-awareness you can better navigate the many disruptors and innovations in healthcare, which will allow you to maintain focus and guide your teams effectively.

Seek feedback

Seeking feedback can take several forms, including formal and informal evaluations, which may include peer feedback. The literature recommends finding a trusted partner (a colleague or mentor) to help facilitate your leadership journey by providing real-time feedback and holding you accountable.

In addition to facilitating personal and professional growth, feedback also can help you identify opportunities for improvement and gain an understanding of verbal and nonverbal communication cues. Denning, Dye and Garman, Goleman and colleagues, Cecchi-Dimeglio, and Northouse offer several examples of leaders, unaware of their perceived communication style, gaining significant insights through seeking feedback.

Storytelling, a powerful tool, can help foster an increased connection between you and the audience and enhance inspiration.

Feedback improves EI beyond self-awareness; it also enhances social skills among team members and aids in developing empathy. Nurses expect peer feedback, and it's critical to the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Magnet® model. Peer feedback also supports new nurses as they work with a preceptor and when they begin considering a move up an organization's clinical ladder.

Enlist a mentor

The intense work of building your EI requires the assistance of a mentor as a sounding board. This relationship, distinct from that of an accountability partner, can help you develop communication skills and learn how to handle various situations. Leaders frequently encounter scenarios that require delivering negative feedback or undesirable news to clinical teams. A mentor can help you think through the communication plan using EI. Mentors play a critical role in the development of their mentees; many serve in this role throughout a leader's career while others serve for a specific purpose.

Improve communication

Self-awareness will help you better understand your feelings and also identify emotions in others, which can facilitate your ability to "read the room." As a nurse leader, actively assessing your team's reactions and emotions can help you determine how they're receiving your message and whether you're achieving buy-in. Storytelling and decoding communication aid in this effort.

Storytelling. Storytelling, a powerful tool, can help foster an increased connection between you and the audience and enhance inspiration. It can aid retention of the message or value you're communicating. You also can use storytelling to improve patient outcomes, advocate for legislative and regulatory change, and promote a healthy work environment.

Fundamental to storytelling and harnessing EI is recognizing the audience's emotional needs—whether you're talking to an individual or an entire auditorium. Dennings describes various type of stories, including fables, vision, springboard, and teaching; each aims to elicit a different response from the audience. To properly select the appropriate storytelling approach, you must understand the audience's needs. Once you've established those needs, you can use the proper storytelling technique

to communicate your message effectively. (See *What's your story?*)

Decoding communication. Assessing your surroundings and interpreting nonverbal cues play pivotal roles in EI. Nurses frequently assess patients' body language, facial expressions, and even silence to provide crucial information about their comfort, pain, or emotional state. You can extend this skill to interpret the nonverbal cues of staff.

The capacity to perceive emotions in nonverbal expressions allows you to assess the response in the room and identify those with differing opinions. Picture the employee shifting in their seat or displaying discomfort during a discussion. You may want to speak to this person privately to obtain their perspective. Denning noted that assessing listener responses also provides value in storytelling; it can let you know whether the story is having the intended impact.

As you ascend the hierarchy within an organization, your ability to read emotions becomes increasingly essential, especially since many staff members may feel hesitant to share differing opinions with you. A connection exists between empathy and the ability to perceive the responses and emotions of listeners. Understanding how people respond to your leadership can prove critical when reflecting on the work of the nursing profession.

EI in leadership models

Northouse describes EI as the cornerstone of several leadership models, including transformational, servant, and authentic. Arguably, the significance of EI extends to other models, such as situational (with its focus on assessing the follower's needs) and leader-member exchange (with its emphasis on forming relationships).

Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring followers to achieve goals and places significant importance on understanding and adapting group needs (a task more easily achieved with heightened EI). The *authentic leader* exemplifies genuineness, builds relationships, and has a strong sense of purpose, personal values, self-discipline, and compassion. True authentic leadership requires self-awareness—a direct connection to EI. The *servant leader* assesses the needs of and empowers followers to develop to their fullest potential.

All of these leadership models comprise EI's core aspects: awareness, empathy, and active listening. A commitment to personal EI

can help you fully leverage these approaches to meet staff needs.

EI in healthcare

The upheaval caused by COVID-19 serves as a perfect example of the rapid changes within nursing and healthcare. In this dynamic culture, cultivating and improving one's EI can serve as a strategic advantage and a self-protective measure from burnout.

Enhancing your self-awareness can help you understand your strengths, weaknesses, and emotional triggers, enabling you to navigate the complexities of decision-making in high-stakes situations. Regulation of emotions becomes a requirement for maintaining composure in healthcare chaos, which aids appropriate communication and decision-making.

Emotional agility, a hallmark of EI, empowers healthcare leaders to adapt to evolving needs. The ability to pivot, innovate, and respond effectively in the face of uncertainty defines the skills demanded of healthcare leaders. In addition, EI will prove essential to building strong relationships—within the leadership team and among frontline staff—as well as understanding the needs of an entire organization.

Your ability to leverage EI to optimize various leadership approaches can help you guide teams in the midst of high turnover rates and staff shortages. Consider transformational, authentic, and servant leadership to promote retention and engagement and foster innovation, which will prove crucial as healthcare evolves.

Cultivate and inspire

As a nursing leader, you must respond to immediate challenges and use your skills to assess, diagnose, plan, and implement strategies for your organization's future needs, all while ensuring the well-being of staff and patients. Properly evaluating the needs of those you lead involves communication styles that resonate with diverse stakeholders and adaptable leadership approaches that can seamlessly evolve with the healthcare organization's ever-changing demands. In the midst of perpetual healthcare transformation, nursing leaders armed with well-honed EI can better navigate uncertainties, cultivate resilience in both ourselves and teams, and inspire collective excellence. **AN**

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WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Use one of these storytelling approaches to connect with audiences:

- **Fable:** Tell a fiction-based story to convey a lesson.
- **Springboard:** Help audiences quickly grasp how a system change can occur and then apply it to a larger-scale change.
- **Vision:** Offer a big-picture description of the future to evoke action.
- **Teaching:** Use various story types to discuss mistakes and how they were corrected.

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