

IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP: EXECUTIVES' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE SELF [MIS] PERCEPTIONS

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The recent and widespread interest in the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) at work (Goleman, 1998) has led to the development of multi-rater or 360-degree survey instruments that are designed to measure emotional intelligence in the workplace (Boyatzis, Goleman, Rhee, 1999). These measures are thought to be useful to individuals because they (1) provide feedback on a person's relative strengths and weaknesses compared to others in the same organization or within a similar role in general, and (2) they provide feedback on the gap or discrepancy between a person's self-perceptions and how they are perceived or rated by others.

Practitioners and organizational consultants, based on their experiences with clients, firmly believe that multi-rater or 360 degree feedback systems enhance self-knowledge and consequently improve managerial behavior (Hazucha, Hezlett, & Schneider, 1993; London & Beatty, 1993). Scholarly research has confirmed these sentiments and found that higher levels of congruence between managerial "self" and "other" behavioral ratings is associated with managerial effectiveness and performance (Church, 1997; Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Van Velsor et al., 1993). It is also widely believed that this self-other discrepancy is greater for those that are higher-level managers; although empirical studies have failed to validate this observation (Church, 1997).

The present research will explore the relationship between self-other discrepancy and job level with a measure of emotional intelligence. It is hypothesized that self-other discrepancy scores will be higher for those individuals who have higher level jobs. Although one might assume that higher level (i.e., more successful) managers ought to possess a better understanding of themselves; it is also possible that as managers move up within an organization, there are fewer "sounding boards" that provide opportunities to get feedback from others. Therefore, because of this, higher level managers may have less opportunity to calibrate their self-perceptions against those of others.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were mined from the Hay/McBer North American Emotional Intelligence Database. This emotional intelligence database contained 4998 people. Because 75% of these people did not report their job level, the present study is based on the remaining 1214 participants (response rate = 25%). Seven hundred and thirty-six (61%) of the participants were male while 462 (38%) were female. Participants reflected relatively broad age groups: 5% were between the ages of 20—29; 21% were 30—39; 28% were 40—49; 16% were 50—59; 2% were over 60 years old; and 30% (354) of this data were missing. The majority of participants

were well educated: 46% had advanced degrees; 37% were college graduates; 8% had some college; 5% were secondary school graduates; 1% did not graduate from secondary school; and 3% of this data were missing. The majority of participants were Caucasian (82%), 4% were African American; 3% were Asian; 4% were Hispanic; 4% were “Other”; and the remaining 3% was missing. Participants also served various functions within their organizations (e.g., finance, human resources, research and development, sales, marketing, technical, manufacturing, executive/general management, etc.).

Emotional Intelligence Inventory (ECI)

The Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) is a multi-rater survey instrument that provides self, manager, direct report, and peer ratings on a series of behavioral indicators of emotional intelligence, based on the emotional competencies identified by Goleman (1998). The ECI encompasses 110 items within 20 competencies, organized into the following four clusters (See Table 1): Self-Awareness, Social-Awareness, Self-Management, and Social Skills (Boyatzis, Goleman, Rhee, 1999). Previous research has shown the ECI to have high levels of internal consistency (Boyatzis & Burckle, 1999).

Job Level

Embedded within a demographic survey, participants reported their job level. Participants responded to a six-point scale; 1 = “entry-level individual contributor” and 6 = “senior-level manager.” Participants job level yielded a value of 1 through 6. Based on participants’ response, a “low” and “high” job level rating was created; job levels 1—3 were considered “low” (N=159) and job levels 4—6 were considered “high” (N=628).

Job Level	Description	Frequency	Percent
1	Entry-level Individual Contributor	22	1.8
2	Mid-level Individual Contributor	82	6.8
3	Senior-level Individual Contributor	123	10.1
4	First-level Manager	164	13.5
5	Mid-level Manager	341	28.1
6	Senior-level Manager	482	39.7
Total		1214	100%

Procedure

Participants rated themselves on the ECI and were also rated by others (i.e., peers, managers, and direct reports). Average scores for each competency were computed and competency gap or discrepancy scores were calculated. Competency gap/discrepancy scores were participants’ “self” score minus their “total others” score. A positive gap score indicates that participants rated themselves higher than did others on a particular competency. If the gap score is negative, participants tended to rate themselves lower than did others. Several methods exist for the calculation of self-other discrepancy (Church, 1997).

Results

An ANOVA was computed to test for differences between high- and low-level participants on all 20 competencies and EI clusters. Table 1 on page 5 shows that competency gap scores are significantly higher for high-level participants than lower-level participants on 19 of 20 competencies (i.e., all except Organizational Awareness), confirming the hypothesized relationship between job level and self-other discrepancy.

Mean scores (Table 1) for high- and low-level participants reveal some interesting patterns. Nearly all competency gap scores for high-level participants are positive. This suggests that higher level participants consistently rate themselves higher than others. The majority of competency gap scores for low-level participants are negative or around zero. This suggests that lower level participants are more likely to see themselves as others see them. A gap score of zero indicates that, on average, there was no difference between how participants see themselves and how they are seen by others.

As a comparison to help interpret the above findings, Table 2 on page 6 includes Gap Norms calculated from the entire North American database (N=3627). These norms suggest that, on average, ECI participants tend to over-rate themselves; this is, rate themselves higher than they are rated by others. This is consistent with previous self-other discrepancy findings (Church, 1997). The gaps are high because the ECI has mostly been administered to higher level participants. For example, the average job-level rating for participants in this database is 4.78 (N=1214; SD=1.34) which suggests that 81% of the sample categorized themselves as “high-level.” This may explain, why, on average, participants tended to over-rate themselves since mostly high level participants are represented in this database.

Table 2 on page 6 further demonstrates the relationship between job-level and EI. Participants’ ECI gap scores were correlated with their self-reported job level ratings. Although relatively small, significant, positive correlations were found for all 4 clusters and job level. Therefore, the higher level participants tended to have bigger gaps between their self-other perceptions. These findings help to more firmly establish a relationship self-misperception and job level because not only were differences found between “high” and “low” level participants, but a consistent pattern was revealed (i.e., a correlation) through all job levels.

ECI Clusters

Effect size differences were additionally computed for competency gap cluster scores. Effect size equaled the difference between the groups being compared, divided by the standard deviation of the combined groups. This is a direct measure of the size of the difference between the groups, that is not influenced by sample size (Nickerson, 2000). The table below summarizes gap differences between low- and high-level participants. This table below indicates that high level participants over-rated themselves on the Self-Awareness cluster by 15% more than lower level participants, for example.

ECI Cluster Gap Score	Low Level	High Level	Effect size % Difference
Self-Awareness	-.01	.29	+15%
Social Awareness	-.02	.17	+8%
Self Management	-.01	.26	+13%
Social Skills	-.05	.21	+11%

In an attempt to better understand the relationship between job level and self-other discrepancy, another ANOVA was computed to test for differences between high- and lower-level participants on their self and total others ECI cluster scores. Table 3 shows that high-level participants rated themselves higher than lower level participants on all 4 ECI clusters. Alternatively, some evidence was found to suggest that lower level participants are rated higher by others than are higher level participants—two of four EI clusters

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that higher-level employees are more likely to have an inflated view of their emotional intelligence competencies and *less* congruence with the perceptions of others who work with them often and know them well than lower-level employees. This information is valuable to our clients because previous research has firmly established that high performing managers tend to have more accurate self-perceptions. That is, high-performing individuals' self-perceptions tend to match the perceptions/ratings of others. Therefore, helping managers and executives better understand how they are perceived by others can have significant implications for performance improvement.

There are a couple of reasonable explanations for these findings. First, people that are higher within an organization have fewer opportunities for feedback from others because there are literally fewer people above them within the organization that can provide such feedback. Second, it may be that people are less inclined to give constructive feedback to higher status individuals in general. Perhaps, even when this information is specifically asked for by managers or executives, people may be less likely to give candid feedback that is less than flattering.

Although previous research (Church, 1997) did not find a relationship between self-other discrepancy and management level, the current study showed that this discrepancy is greater for those in higher-level positions. This may be because Church (1997) used a truncated range (i.e., middle vs. senior managers) whereas the current study looked at discrepancy across a wider range of job levels. Furthermore, Church (1997) studied *managerial* self- versus other-perceptions. These behaviors may be less amenable to self-inflation because verbal and nonverbal feedback from others may be more evident for managerial behaviors rather than emotional intelligence behaviors.

Evidence from Table 3 supports the “self-inflation” interpretation by showing that high level participants rated themselves higher on the ECI clusters than lower level participants. Alternatively, some evidence was found to suggest that lower level participants are rated higher on the ECI clusters by others than higher level participants. This may reveal a more critical bias

toward higher level individuals. This would serve to seemingly inflate the self-perceptions of higher level managers and executives.

Alternatively, although less likely, it may be that because higher level positions require greater job complexity and contexts are less evident, raters are not in as good of a position to judge the competencies of higher level positions. As a consequence, raters may default to “middle-of-the-road” ratings to be safe in their judgments. This bias may cause the discrepancy, rather than a more “self-enhancing” interpretation.

Future Research Directions

Because of the sampling procedure, the results of this study are highly generalizable to a wide variety of individuals, job functions, and organizations. The findings are, however, to some extent limited because of the 25% response rate. Typically, a 25% response rate would be considered inadequate; however, since the sample is relatively large it is not unreasonable to assume that those that reported their job level are representative of the remaining participants that did not. Future research might utilize specific data samples to validate the findings of this paper.

Results in Table 3 suggest a need to determine whether high level participants *are* higher in emotional intelligence. A construct validity study with an alternative measure of EI, perhaps a more behaviorally oriented measure, would shed light on this question.

Future research might validate and explore why higher-level participants over-rated themselves while lower-level participants were more likely to rate themselves as did others. The discrepancy might reflect natural, situational conflicts between higher- and lower-level positions rather than “personality” differences between higher- and lower-level managers. For example, it may be that higher-level positions generate self-aggrandizing sentiments. Although, these sentiments might help provide high level managers the self-confidence they need to perform their duties; however, they may paradoxically also create difficulties because they develop a false understanding of their strengths while similarly overlooking opportunities to develop their strengths in areas with needed improvement.

Finally, this research studied self-other discrepancies on a measure of emotional intelligence. It would be interesting to replicate these findings with a generic Competency Behavior Inventory to determine whether this particular self [mis] perception is consistent across a wide variety of domains.

*For further information/comments/suggestions, or opportunities to continue this research program, please contact:

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Table 1. Overall ECI competency differences between low (n=159) and high job-level (n=628) participants.

Competency	Job Level				F	p
	Low		High			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
SELF AWARENESS	-.01	.70	.29	.70	23.98	.000
Emotional Self Awareness	.20	.98	.52	.97	13.59	.000
Accurate Self Assessment	-.01	.78	.29	.83	17.33	.000
Self-Confidence	-.23	.81	.07	.76	18.81	.000
SOCIAL AWARENESS	-.02	.86	.17	.75	8.15	.004
Empathy	.08	.87	.27	.88	6.13	.014
Organizational Awareness	-.07	1.03	.04	.90	1.93	.165
Service Orientation	-.07	1.10	.21	.92	10.63	.001
SELF MANAGEMENT	-.01	.74	.26	.69	8.50	.000
Self-Control	-.29	1.02	.02	.99	12.19	.001
Trustworthiness	.27	.97	.56	.90	12.83	.000
Conscientiousness	-.20	.98	.06	.90	9.92	.002
Adaptability	.17	.89	.32	.85	3.90	.049
Achievement Orientation	.09	.85	.32	.84	9.13	.003
Initiative	-.09	.90	.28	.79	26.97	.000
SOCIAL SKILLS	-.05	.83	.21	.74	13.76	.000
Developing Others	.08	1.09	.35	.95	9.95	.002
Leadership	-.11	1.14	.12	.98	6.09	.014
Influence	.02	.95	.21	.87	5.78	.016
Communication	.01	.99	.27	.88	10.79	.001
Change Catalyst	.08	1.02	.30	.88	7.31	.007
Conflict Management	.02	1.07	.30	.97	10.01	.002
Building Bonds	-.38	1.08	-.17	.94	6.18	.013
Teamwork and Collaboration	-.10	.85	.26	.80	24.40	.000

Table 2. Overall ECI competency gap norms from North American database and correlations between ECI competencies and clusters with participants' job level.

Competency GAP	Gap Norms (N=3627)		Job-Level (N=787)	
	Mean	SD	r	p
SELF AWARENESS	.26	.72	.18	.000
Emotional Self Awareness	.50	.99	.12	.000
Accurate Self Assessment	.24	.84	.14	.000
Self-Confidence	.03	.79	.19	.000
SOCIAL AWARENESS	.16	.77	.14	.000
Empathy	.28	.85	.12	.001
Organizational Awareness	.02	.94	.08	.03
Service Orientation	.17	1.01	.14	.000
SELF MANAGEMENT	.21	.70	.18	.000
Self-Control	-.01	1.02	.15	.000
Trustworthiness	.51	.92	.15	.000
Conscientiousness	.03	.88	.14	.000
Adaptability	.26	.86	.11	.003
Achievement Orientation	.26	.87	.11	.002
Initiative	.19	.84	.18	.000
SOCIAL SKILLS	.17	.76	.14	.000
Developing Others	.32	.96	.11	.002
Leadership	.11	.99	.10	.003
Influence	.15	.89	.06	.07
Communication	.22	.90	.12	.001
Change Catalyst	.26	.92	.12	.001
Conflict Management	.25	.98	.12	.000
Building Bonds	-.19	.99	.10	.004
Teamwork and Collaboration	.23	.83	.18	.000

Table 3. ECI cluster differences between low (n=159) and high job-level (n=628) participants for self and total others scores.

EI Cluster	Job Level				<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
	Low		High			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
SELF SCORES						
Self-Awareness	5.43	.66	5.58	.65	6.20	.01
Social Awareness	5.49	.77	5.58	.71	1.88	.17
Self-Management	5.33	.68	5.57	.61	17.39	.000
Social Skill	5.08	.83	5.38	.70	22.24	.000
OTHER SCORES						
Self-Awareness	5.45	.48	5.28	.58	10.55	.001
Social Awareness	5.51	.51	5.41	.40	3.94	.05
Self-Management	5.34	.34	5.30	.30	.58	.447
Social Skill	5.17	.12	5.12	.18	.99	.321

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