

The Results are In: You CAN Improve Emotional Intelligence in Leaders through a Coaching Program

Diane Foster, MCC

Sometimes, even the best coaches wonder if they can make a difference where it really matters. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been touted in recent years as the one thing that will make a difference. If this is true, then what can we as executive coaches do to insure better “EI” in those leaders we coach? This article presents a case study of how Diane Foster worked as an external mentor coach to an internal team at the US Department of Labor over two years to develop a program that achieved significant gains not only in the Emotional Intelligence of the targeted leaders, but also in bottom line business results. It presents evidence that, if the coaching program is organized as an organization development intervention, it will be much more successful.

Research by Daniel Goleman, with executives in hundreds of organizations has shown that the “soft skills” or competencies associated with emotional intelligence are twice as important as any other factor in predicting outstanding performance in the workplace, accounting for more than 85% of star performance among leaders. Moreover, emotional intelligence training and development for managers has been shown to double and even triple employee productivity, reduce grievances, and increase employee satisfaction and retention.

Coaches are frequently called to support EI in leaders. Ever since I became a coach I have had the belief that if the managers and leaders I’ve worked with in organizations could also become coaches that their self-awareness, social skills, empathy, and personal competence would automatically be raised.

But implementing a successful coaching program (or any program) that accomplishes what is promised is no simple task. Even when there is a recognized need for a leadership coaching program, experience with organization development issues as well as sound knowledge of how to support emotional intelligence are required to ensure that a coaching program will actually affect “the bottom line.” Leaders in organizations need to see that any program that takes time away from actual work functioning will get results, especially in these difficult economic times. Given my experience with the client group I’m about to review and many others, it is my contention that employing sound organization development principles is key to building emotional intelligence through coaching and getting bottom line results. The way the program is “rolled out,” and the components involved make all the difference.

Let me outline the program that I supported in the US Department of Labor to illustrate this:

An Approach that Works

Several years ago leaders at the Office of Human Resources of the U.S. Department of Labor recognized that something different was needed as they struggled with putting together a program to address challenges they were facing. An internal consultant there looked at data he had collected on the need to shift that large hierarchical organization’s

culture to teaming for improvement in performance and morale. He was also concerned because over 70% of the top leaders would be leaving within ten years, and there had been no succession planning or leadership development to replace them. What would reinforce any effort enough to make a real difference? What were the leaders' true needs from a business standpoint?

Through further exploration he discovered that there was a core theme--- the greater organization would benefit if any program could support these DOL leaders in developing the ability to manage themselves and better handle relationships. In other words, they would benefit by growing Emotional Intelligence. The key theme was that building "EI" could improve business functioning.

It was the EI competencies that were really missing, not the knowledge and skill about how to perform their jobs. And it was these skills in its leaders that the organization was going to need the most as it attempted to put better performance measures in place, move to work through business teams and support developing new leadership.

The theory was that making these gains would allow them to pick up their roles differently, and consequently support all those around them in making similar changes. But, he needed the expertise of an external consultant/coach who was fluent in Emotional Intelligence, and organization development. It was at this point that he sought my help.

Initially, I began working with this project manager from the Office of Human Resources, his boss, and another manager. Soon I was working primarily with him, and a new-to-their organization, (but not the DOL) trainer/consultant. They were my "Internal Partners" throughout. Working to develop the "right" program for this culture, we quickly became aware of other needs.

~~///~~ **Restructuring and working with fewer resources meant greater need for leadership to be strategic, and to deal with change more flexibly.** There had been limited development of these capacities in the leadership before. But we believed coaching on EI could support this.

?? **The need to move the organizational structure from hierarchy to front-line for faster responses** and decision-making given the direct customer service needed. Work on this restructure had begun during the Clinton administration, but there was a felt need to have leaders who could support a changing organization. We believed that coaching on EI could also support these leaders in being change-managers.

?? **Need to support a teaming/collaborative organizational structure.** The newest technology supports a potential for cross-global "virtual" teamwork. Programs to leverage the use of this to create synergy and better delegation had already begun. However, there was no previous experience in the leadership for getting work accomplished through "teams." I believed that coaching and growth in Emotional Intelligence would enable the leaders to develop teaming and understand how to promote team synergy.

?? **Need to change the culture from that of "Entitlement" to one of "Empowerment."** Years of working in the government system can breed a sense of complacency and sometimes a feeling of "retired on the job". This is not the attitude that citizens want to see in a government agency. While I was confident

that a coaching for growth in Emotional Intelligence program could reinvigorate most of the leaders, I did not believe that it could turn every single “retired on the job” employee around, and supported the internal team in this view whenever possible.

In addition to the “graying” workforce and the imminent loss of significant intellectual capital due to retirement, results from organizational assessments in recent years had suggested other serious management challenges, including:

- ?? Labor Relations/Employee Relations office reports of significant increases in union grievances and EEO complaints with many complaints due to poor management practice.
- ?? Focus groups and reports from managers throughout the agency expressing concerns about management development and low employee morale.
- ?? More than 50% of employees surveyed reporting that communication was a problem.
- ?? More than 60% of employees surveyed reporting that trust and fairness from management was a problem.

We believed that if we introduced a “Coaching for High Performance with Emotional Intelligence” program that we could embrace all of these needs and ensure enough success that the pilot could be picked up and spread across the greater organization. That was our goal.

Potential Barriers to Implementing a Successful Coaching Program:

We had to be “artful” about introducing any “coaching program” – especially one that would make “them” more “emotionally intelligent.” My mentor-coach approach was to support this as an organization development intervention. There was resistance as soon as we mentioned the program to engage the senior leadership in our efforts. Many of the heads of divisions in the DOL have been there for over 30 years, and had cut their teeth in backgrounds like military service that promoted concepts of hierarchy and “command leadership.” “Emotional Intelligence” sounded like another “airy-fairy” program that some psychologist who didn’t understand business had dreamed up. They saw little reason for training on leadership when they had been “leading” their organizations or business units for so many years. What possible difference could it make?

Logistics were also an issue. We needed to insure that the leaders in the National Office were “walking their talk,” and were involved in becoming coaches, but we also needed to keep the pilot focused on one of the regions in the United States. It was important that the program reach from the National Office in Washington D.C. down through a regional office to district offices in that one region. For the success of the pilot, we needed workable numbers, and this meant restricting our efforts to one region only.

Design for both Mentoring the Internal Team and for the Coaching Program:

The Coaching Program for EI was designed to be supported through training the internal consultants how to be coaches. They would coach the leaders in the National Office and one region, to “take a coach approach to their work,” and to build a “coaching culture.”

My role as “mentor coach” with the internal team was to come up with a design for implementation that would get great results in the pilot of the program, and support their follow-through with coaching.

Besides the organizational resistance already mentioned, key hurdles on which the internal team needed coaching included:

- ?? Getting the Agency Director and his direct reports’ commitment to the program.
- ?? Picking the “right” pilot group region. Again, commitment of the regional leadership and one with the right size and right set of issues would help ensure success.
- ?? Making sure that the targeted agency was involved in the design and implementation to get their buy-in. I suggested a “diagonal slice/cross-function” group of representatives from the agency join the “Design Team.” The selection of these agency representatives was important. We needed some “real workers” who could also be “influence” managers/leaders in the organization. I supported the facilitation of getting the information and involvement from these agency representatives so we could make sure the program was tied correctly to the bottom line.
- ?? Making sure that the program was delivered so that it was “business smart,” and well-coached. The “Internal Team” had no previous background in coaching so needed to learn to deliver a coaching program and become coaches themselves. Two project managers from the target organization were selected, joined the internal coaches in the certification in delivery of the coaching program, and then also became “coaches”-- to their own organization.
- ?? Getting enough commitment for the requisite number of follow-on coaching sessions to really change the behavior and performance of the targeted leaders.
- ?? How to choose and implement the right assessment for the program—particularly giving a 360 degree assessment where there was no experience or organizational history of using a tool like this. Needing evidence of success meant need for measurement for the pilot: What, When? How?¹
- ?? How to “profile” each leader to be coached and work with them to get their commitment to a development plan.

The “Coaching for High Performance with EI” Program

What we came up with to ensure success included:

- ?? Extensive orientation and communication with program participants.

¹ Care was taken in the design of the program to build in both pre and post-measurements so that there could be some tangible proof of its viability. Multi-rater feedback tools were used to assess the chosen pilot participants’ leadership competency and emotional intelligence. A climate survey of the organization was delivered to get feedback on how those working with the participants perceived the effect of their behaviors on the organization. And, I held “exit” interviews with all pilot participants to get their feedback on what they felt they had accomplished and how the program had actually worked.

- ?? Assessment with the ECI² (and other leadership competency assessment tools)
- ?? Careful roll-out of a well-designed “Coaching for High Performance with Emotional Intelligence”³ training.
- ?? Twenty follow-on coaching sessions – completed by “new” eager coaches, trained for this work⁴
- ?? Profiling each leader and creating a development plan for performance improvement with their coach. (As much as possible each “candidate” was given a choice of which of the four internal coaches they wanted to work with and matches made on this basis).
- ?? Regular mentor coaching meetings (usually by teleconference) supported by coaching resources from the Mentor Coach⁵
- ?? Careful assessment for feedback for recalibrating and improving the ECI 360 was given again at the end of the program as a “retest” and results measured against those used to profile each leader and produce her/his development plan. There was an organizational climate survey delivered in the targeted leaders offices to look at whether the leadership program had impact on the culture of each leader’s offices. Exit interviews were held by the external Mentor Coach with each of the 23 participants.
- ?? A final “graduation” celebration and review of results with all program participants, and leaders from across the organization in attendance.

Evaluation Proves Success

All data gathered with the careful measurement in place in this program thoroughly supported that it addressed all critical success factors: the business goals of the targeted agency, the goals of introducing Emotional Intelligence as a business solution, and introducing a “coaching culture” to a very hierarchical organization. “Coaching for High Performance with Emotional Intelligence” was a complete success.

Productivity in program development in the targeted leaders’ offices doubled in six months, as measured against the record of program production the previous year. This was particularly significant since the pilot was conducted during a period of upheaval in the Department of Labor agency (changing political administration as the Bush appointees took over, continued restructuring and the tremendous impact on the offices of September 11th).

More specifically, it achieved:

² The Emotional Competence Inventory. This assessment tool was developed by HayMcBer with the support of Daniel Goleman.

³ The Corporate Coaching Clinic was tailored by the coaches with material to specifically address Emotional Intelligence, and relate to key organizational issues. Over the 6 months studied in the pilot, there was a “Mid-Point Forum” where participants’ understanding of coaching was discussed and reinforced.

⁴ To their great credit, the internal coaches embraced their new roles thoroughly and completely. They were marvelous partners and deserve most of the credit for the results obtained---- they coached these leaders.

⁵ Diane Foster’s “Skill Kit for Leaders: Real-Time Tools for Developing Leadership Skills” was support material for building EI, but also other leadership competencies such as delegation, conflict management, time-management, performance management, etc.

- ?? Measurable improvement in the difficult-to-assess leadership competencies of Emotional Intelligence (*please see graphs below derived from composite ECI results*).
- ?? Measurable improvements on **all** of the identified success factors for the program⁶
- ?? Observed positive changes in targeted leaders' behaviors in the National and Regional offices of the pilot as measured by an organizational survey and exit interviews.
- ?? A desire by the targeted region to insure that the program become "our way of doing business."
- ?? Numerous "testimonials" by program participants about benefits of both personal and professional behavior changes they were able to make given their coaching support.⁷

A few of the many quotes collected from the exit interviews on just the objective of insuring participants' direct reports feel improvement in how they are managed and how they perform in support of the mission:

- ?? "Before the pilot, my colleagues and I would take on special assignments and bust ourselves to get them done alone. After receiving the model, we started using staff, involving them, and have backed off to let them do more. There is much more ability to delegate and trust and to coach them to do it."
- ?? "I definitely have better communication with the National Office."
- ?? "I am more inclusive. I'm not avoiding a situation where it can lead to controversy. I've seen this with my boss and the Regional Administrator too."
- ?? "We have established our own coaching sessions for each other (on top of those with our assigned coach). We use the coaching model for problem-solving, brainstorming new solutions, and supporting each other in our roles."
- ?? "The pilot has effectively improved our communication. We are stronger leaders because of this. I can now see we were not communicating before. It definitely has improved the management of our Region."

⁶ These "success factors" included:

- ?? Improved horizontal communication particularly in the targeted region, but also in the National Office
- ?? Improved horizontal communication between State Directors
- ?? Improved vertical communication between the National office and all State Directors
- ?? Increased involvement/interaction between Regional Administrators and Regional Directors
- ?? 80% of the participants believe they improved their management capabilities and as a result improved the organizations capability/mission.
- ?? Participants' direct reports feel improvement in how they are managed and how they perform in support of the mission
- ?? Developmental opportunities have improved
- ?? Team members feel more engaged in team process & participation
- ?? Demonstrated increased levels of EI, particularly greater self-awareness
- ?? Team Leaders Feel Better Engaged and Integrated
- ?? Increased levels of trust and respect
- ?? Demonstrated increased performance levels

⁷ These testimonials may be obtained by contacting the office of Diane Foster & Associates.

- ?? “This model has helped me better communicate with my direct reports, and to show that I value their opinion. Now I involve them in the solution and with coming up with the answer.”
- ?? “By using the model of listening, discovery, and then recap --- the process of making sure that what I said and what I heard back were the same, and then offering to help them to remove barriers, I was able to trust them more.”
- ?? “I feel that our regional directors and the National Office are more on the same wave length. I sense a greater alignment. We’re now all in accord ---We Dialogue and listen much better.”
- ?? “There has been a significant reduction of employee complaints.”
- ?? “At a recent meeting in response to a crisis, the managers gave kudos to their bosses about how they handled the crisis. (September 11th). They saw that these managers were starting to think about them as people.”

In summary, the DOL faced challenges and needs similar to those in many organizations today:

- ?? Changing demographics of leadership - More than 80% of the senior leaders would soon be retiring.
- ?? Fewer resources meant greater need for leadership to be strategic.
- ?? Need to move the leadership paradigm from hierarchical to front-line for faster responses and decision-making given the direct customer service need.
- ?? Need to support work getting accomplished through teams and a collaborative organizational structure to leverage potential for team synergy.
- ?? Need to change the culture from that of “entitlement” to one of “empowerment.”

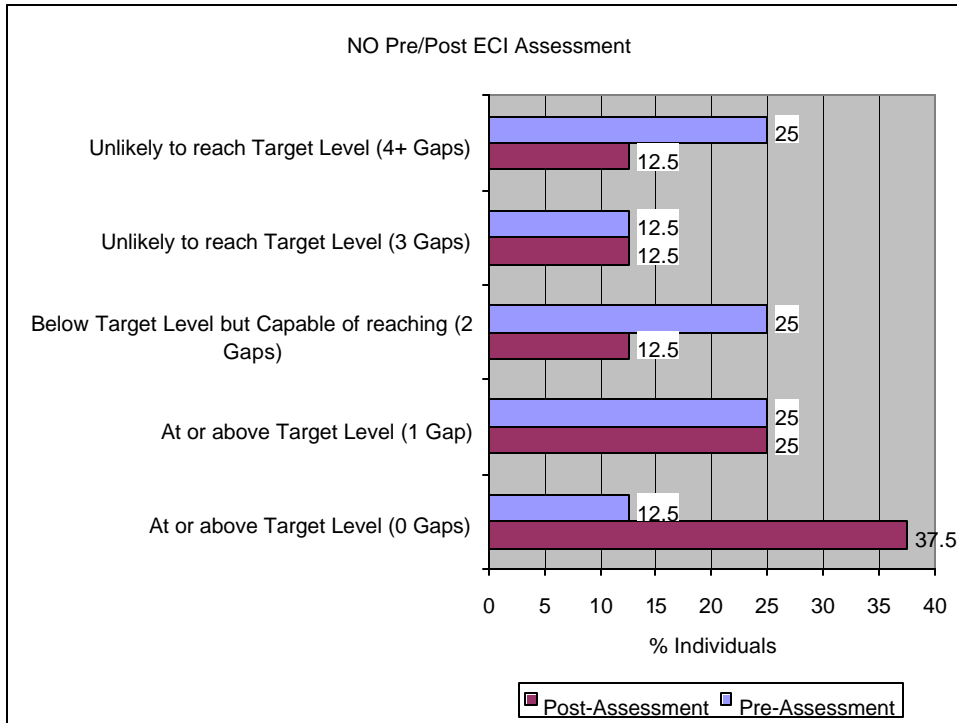
All indicators reveal high levels of success and satisfaction with the impact of a leadership coaching program focused on developing emotional intelligence. In our work, managers, as well as their direct reports, demonstrated significant gains in perceived levels of competence in crucial management skills such as listening and conflict management, team building and collaboration—and reported improved productivity, communication, and employee satisfaction both in the National Office and in the field.

However, I believe we would not have had these same results if we had just gone about this as a training/coaching program. Only by tying it to their bottom line and their organizational issues was it accepted enough to make a difference. **If you do this, our results strongly indicate that coaching aimed at improving emotional intelligence competencies dramatically enhances leadership skills, performance and produces definitive business results.**

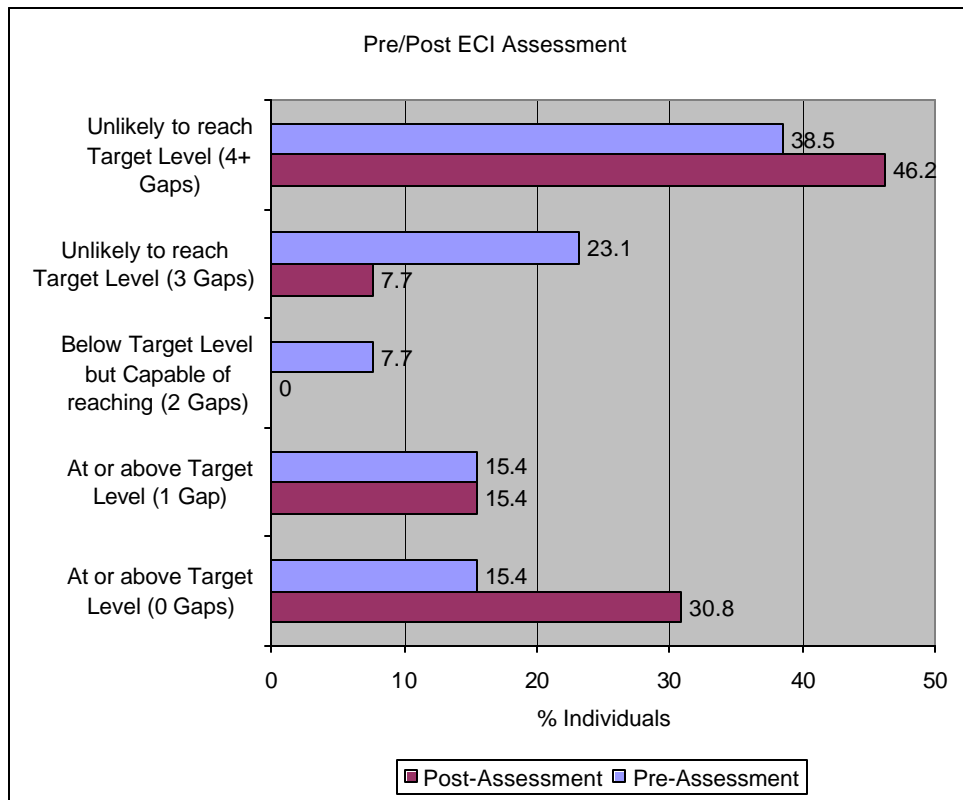
Assessment data evaluation

In order to provide empirical data that would demonstrate the extent to which the “Coaching for High Performance with Emotional Intelligence Pilot participants’ individual and group competency levels were developed through coaching—and in the

process, to test the hypothesis that coaching is an effective means for cultivating emotional intelligence—each participant completed the Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI)⁸ at the beginning and end of the program. The first graph below shows results from that assessment from the National Office pilot participants. The second two graphs show feedback for the Regional leaders.



⁸ 1999 Hay Group



ECI feedback for the Leaders from the Region

Region Emotional Competency Summary		
<u>Cluster/Competency</u>	<u>Need for Attention</u>	
Self-Awareness	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>
Accurate Self-Assessment	Important	Moderate
Social Awareness		
Organizational Awareness	Important	Moderate
Social Skills		
Influence	Important	Moderate
Communication	Important	Moderate