



IGNACIO LOPEZ

The EQ Way

How Emotionally Intelligent
School Leaders
Navigate Turbulent Times

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Foreword

The answer is “yes.” The question could be any variation of the following: *Does emotional intelligence really matter? Will these strategies help me become a stronger leader? Do the “soft skills” of human interactions make a difference? Do I really need to read this book?*

I’ve known Dr. Ignacio Lopez for well over a decade, during which time his skills and savvy have repeatedly impressed me. We met through conferences and committees at ASCD, and it was a no-brainer for Alisa Simeral and me to invite him to be a part of our Building Teachers’ Capacity Cadre as a professional learning facilitator, providing professional development across the country for administrators, instructional coaches, and other school leaders.

In this book, Ignacio explores emotional intelligence—or EQ—something with which he’s cultivated a significant amount of expertise. Over the years, the importance of fostering our EQ has become more and more essential. As Ignacio shares, it’s grown from a “nice to have” skill to a “need to have” imperative if we’re to effectively lead people through change, growth, struggles, or any other sort of challenging times.

And since I don't remember a time that leadership wasn't challenging, I'd say developing our EQ is critical always, in every situation, in all settings.

Always. Proactively. Deliberately. It's not an option to be emotionally intelligent because we're talking about leading people. And because people are driven first by emotion and then reason, it's logical to connect with, understand, and appeal to our people at that level. It's simply a matter of tending to the Human Element in our work as leaders, which Ignacio argues is the most important and impactful facet of our leadership responsibilities.

My own experiences as a school leader serve to amplify the message Ignacio shares. I've been the principal of three schools, all of which found themselves in an uphill battle toward success and each of which sat in a precarious situation of underachievement, strife, and undue external pressures. The accomplishments that followed were not the result of my extraordinary natural leadership abilities, my outlandish intelligence, or my vast knowledge of strategic planning and organizational management. Rather, our collective successes came after we grew together as a team, began to understand one another as human beings, and built an extensive network of connections. The humans in the equation all learned to work in concert with one another—first at the emotional level, then at the tactical level.

What I've found fascinating (and daunting) is that while Ignacio urges us to emphasize our EQ as a fundamental leadership approach, I recall educators and leaders I've known who have said, "I'm not really into the soft skills," "We've got more important things to do," "I'm not a touchy-feely type of leader," or something like that.

Is that you? Do you think of emotional intelligence as a frivolous attribute or perhaps as something that a rare few people are endowed with at birth?

Good news! Over the course of this book, you'll uncover that EQ is a learnable, developable skill. You can get better at it, and Ignacio will show you how! Further, he offers strategies and approaches to help you develop the EQ of your schools, teams, and boards of education. You'll learn about the keys of open communication, clarity of vision, presence of shared values, and opportunities to build a network of committed stakeholders.

Remember, as a leader, *it's not about you*. It's about your people. EQ is simply a set of attitudes, behaviors, and strategies that promote that reality as a priority, so you and your school community can thrive through tough times (and, remember, *always*).

As a reflective practitioner, I'm impressed (and not at all surprised) by Ignacio's insertion of self-reflective questions throughout the text. I encourage you to take advantage of these prompts by pausing, reflecting, maybe even journaling or exchanging thoughts with a trusted colleague, and determining a plan of action to move forward with confidence and a strategic mindset.

Do you want to be an amazing leader? Would you like to develop your emotional intelligence? Are you interested in connecting more tightly with your people? Will you have an incredible impact on your school community? Is it time to strive toward excellence?

The answer is "yes."

—Pete Hall

former teacher, principal, and author of six ASCD books,
including *Creating a Culture of Reflective Practice*



1

Improving Your Emotional Intelligence During Difficult Times

Even though qualities traditionally associated with leadership such as intelligence, determination, and vision are required for success, they are insufficient. Effective leaders are also distinguished by a high degree of emotional intelligence in the form of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and refined social skills. These qualities may sound “soft,” but leadership development research has found direct ties between emotional intelligence and measurable organizational results (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Druskat & Wolff, 2001; Goleman, 1995; Goleman et al., 2002). What’s more, in an era of continued and growing divisiveness, school leaders need to model how to effectively navigate turbulent situations while protecting the learning and development of all children.

The Five Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines five dimensions of social-emotional learning

(SEL) for children: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness. We can take these same dimensions and crosswalk them to leadership development using Goleman's (1995) five dimensions of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

School leaders often unpack Goleman's five dimensions of emotional intelligence with teachers and students without taking the time to consider what the dimensions could mean for us as well. After all, we can't help our teachers and students develop their emotional intelligence if we aren't committed to developing our own.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness refers to a deep understanding of our own emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. School leaders with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful; they are honest with themselves and others. At the same time, they recognize how their feelings affect other people and their performance. School leaders who are self-aware know to recognize and credit the emotional intelligence of others. Too often, leaders don't give self-awareness the attention it deserves.

In times of change or turbulence, there is often a sense of urgency, but good leaders know when to slow down to support and acknowledge their colleagues' emotions. We must not mistake candor about our feelings for softness, and we should respect staff who openly acknowledge their emotions. Sadly, some leaders misinterpret emotional intelligence and self-awareness as signs of not being "tough enough," so their staff tend to bottle up their emotions.

The most successful school leaders I have worked with take an intentional or deliberate approach to building self-awareness through meditating, relying on trusted friends (inside and

outside the district), and getting regular feedback from teachers and colleagues:

- **Meditation:** Implementing meditation practices doesn't have to be formal or ritualistic. Regular moments of pause and reflection can help to improve your moment-to-moment awareness.
- **Relying on trusted friends:** None of us is altogether aware of how we come across to others. School leaders must rely on trusted friends to learn the honest truth. It is worthwhile to ask such friends for their candid and critical objective perspectives on decisions you are making or about to make.
- **Regular feedback from teachers and colleagues:** Once a year, I ask teachers, staff, and students to complete an anonymous online survey in which they tell me what I need to (1) start doing, (2) stop doing, and (3) keep doing. Answers to surveys such as this can help you reflect on your self-awareness development.

Self-Regulation

It is no secret that biological impulses drive our emotions. We cannot do away with negative emotions altogether, but we *can* do much to manage them. Self-regulation is the inner conversation we are always having with ourselves. School leaders who are in control of their feelings act reasonably and create an environment of trust and fairness in which disagreements are sharply reduced. Additionally, knowing how to regulate our emotions can mean the difference between embracing our jobs and burning out.

School leaders who are in control of their emotions are better able to roll with changes and navigate students and staff through tough times. When new challenges arise, they don't panic but

rather stay calm, suspend judgment, and seek out information before moving forward. Like self-awareness, self-regulation does not get the respect it deserves. People who control their emotions are sometimes seen as lacking passion, and it is people with fiery temperaments who have often been thought of as “classic” leaders. Thankfully, this idea is dying out. In my experience, emotional outbursts and extreme displays of negative emotion work against school leaders.

To help keep emotions in check during times of crisis, it’s a good idea to pause and reflect before reacting. Even doing this for as little as two minutes can make a big difference. I have seen principals in the middle of heated debates with parents suddenly stop and say, “I’m sorry, I need to step out for just one minute.” They’d step out, collect themselves, then return to the conversation.

One key to effective self-regulation is knowing when you might be on the cusp of needing it. Being cognizant of your feelings and the physical symptoms—such as churning in your stomach, light-headedness, faster breathing, or panic attacks—of those feelings coming on can help you better self-regulate. For example, I once asked a principal why he kept a fidget spinner on his desk. “They help me, too,” he said. “Not because I’m fidgety but because if I start to reach for this thing in the middle of a difficult conversation or meeting, I know I’m about to lose it.” Reaching for the spinner was a sign for this leader that he needed to begin self-regulating.

Motivation

Good leaders are driven to achieve above and beyond expectations. The key word here is *achieve*: though plenty of people are motivated by external factors such as higher salaries or prestige, the best school leaders are driven by a deep desire to achieve. Many

enter leadership positions because they want to make a difference in the lives of the children and the families they serve. School leaders who are driven to achieve are forever raising the performance bar not only for themselves but also for their students and the school as a whole. They set realistic targets, use data to show improvement, and continuously monitor their progress. In fact, seeing evidence of progress is itself motivating.

Empathy

Of the five dimensions of emotional intelligence, empathy is perhaps the most easily recognized. We have all felt the empathy of a sensitive teacher or friend or been struck by its absence in an unfeeling coach, mentor, or boss. Many people seem to believe that empathy is out of place amid the tough realities of school leadership—but empathy isn't mushiness; it simply means thoughtfully considering others' feelings (and the factors that may be driving those feelings) before making decisions.

School leaders who practice empathy are strong listeners. When meeting with teacher teams, students, or parents, putting down your phone and giving them your undivided attention will help you better understand and connect with them. Use “looping”—the practice of paraphrasing or repeating what you have heard before you speak—as an active listening strategy.

Another key to empathy is talking to people outside our usual social circle or encountering lives and worldviews very different from our own. Sometimes leaders get so caught up in believing their perspective is the only reality that they forget the circumstances other people find themselves in.

It is also important for leaders to praise empathy in others. I have seen school leaders take a moment out of their meetings to

recognize the teachers on their teams whenever they help others achieve their goals. Too often, our attention sways toward the loudest and most negative voices in the room. Noticing the good around us can balance our attention and increase our empathy. The more we cultivate our own empathy and encourage it in others, the more we contribute to an overall culture of empathy in our school.

Social Skills

The first three dimensions of emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation—can be classified as self-management skills. By contrast, the last two, empathy and social skills, concern our ability to manage relationships with others.

Leveraging social skills as a leader during difficult times is not just a matter of friendliness; it is about friendliness with a purpose. Socially skilled school leaders tend to have a wide circle of acquaintances and a knack for finding common ground and building rapport with people of all kinds. This doesn't mean being social all the time, but it does mean working on the assumption that nothing important gets done alone.

School leaders with robust social skills may sometimes appear not to be working when they really are. They may seem to be idly chatting in the hallways with people who don't appear connected to their jobs when in reality they are building relationships with neighborhood leaders or donors. These leaders don't think it makes sense to arbitrarily limit the number or type of relationships they have. They are continuously building bonds across the board because they know they may need help from those connections someday.

Knowing how to pick up on social cues in a social or work setting is another characteristic of leaders with strong social skills. Because these leaders can perceive and correctly interpret social cues, they know when they need to lift others up or help them out. Leaders who don't have this ability may display unsocial behaviors and make others feel uncomfortable, frustrated, or devalued.

Emotional Intelligence and Culturally Responsive School Leadership

As our schools become increasingly diverse, our students need increased exposure to and understanding of other cultures and identities—to sympathize and empathize, learn to coexist, excel together, and love. And we can't claim to be culturally relevant leaders if we are lacking emotional intelligence. If we truly believe that all children can learn, that all children are good, and that all children can be successful, then we must meet *every* child where they are and help them. This is key to ensuring equity and cultural responsiveness.

Culture is an undeniable part of everything we do as humans, and emotional intelligence allows us to share cultural values and norms with students. Every day, students enter school spaces with values and beliefs that may cause them to see the world differently than we do. These values and beliefs shouldn't be dismissed just because they are unfamiliar to us. This is why educators need to sharpen their own emotional intelligence and lead by example. We must be clear that we will not allow our students' cultural differences to be perceived as deficits. Our emotional intelligence sets the tone for the entire school, and our students will not develop their own emotional intelligence unless we lead by example and

model what makes us culturally unique. The easiest way to model this behavior is by giving students time to share their experiences and by listening without being critical or judgmental. Follow-up questions typically lead to a genuine interest in and help develop a perspective of what it means to be from another culture.

There is increasing research on the connection between emotional intelligence and cultural responsiveness in our schools (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2020; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020). According to the literature, teacher preparation programs need to teach educators to develop a culturally responsive lens through which to perceive students, curriculum, and themselves. The same is true for leaders.

There are two phases to culturally responsive work in schools: a discovery phase centered on the emotional intelligence dimensions of self-awareness and empathy, and an application phase for implementing strategies (as Figure 1.1 illustrates). Unfortunately, some individuals engage only with the application phase of this work in schools and ignore the discovery phase. Researchers such as Gay (2010), Hammond (2014), and Ladson-Billings (2021) note that moving toward an inclusive and culturally responsive school takes time and requires processes to discover and apply our own interpretations, beliefs, and development of EQ and cultural awareness.

Figure 1.1 identifies five key steps for creating culturally relevant schools across both the discovery and application phases.

One of the difficulties we face as school leaders, especially during difficult times, is to find the time and create the space to sit through, discover, and share our own epiphanies related to self-awareness and empathy. There is also little appetite among students, staff, and community in most schools to sit with us during these discovery processes. As leaders, we must work hard to instill

FIGURE 1.1

The Discovery and Application Phases of Culturally Responsive Work

Discovery Phase		Application Phase	
Step 1	Develop self-awareness. Unpack your personal realities to become more in tune with students' lived experiences, and learn about your own emotional intelligence and areas of opportunity for improvement.	Step 3	Create welcoming and trusting learning spaces. Consider strategies for engaging students and staff in honest and uncomfortable conversations about cultural relevance or responsiveness; apply a culturally responsive lens to both the physical and emotional learning environments as well as the curriculum.
Step 2	Develop empathy. Reflect on how you influence the learning space and the effect your presence has on students; expand your curiosity of other groups, students, cultures, and so on.	Step 4	Learn about the different cultures, languages, and learning modalities in the learning space. Ask nonjudgmental questions about students' customs and traditions and about how they learn best. The more you know about your students, the more culturally responsive your curriculum and pedagogy can be.
		Step 5	Communicate, sustain, measure, and celebrate diversity in the learning space. Implement strategies for doing these things to keep cultural responsiveness alive in your school or classroom. Measure your cultural responsiveness through data and be willing to intervene where necessary to improve it.

a curiosity about self-awareness and empathy in everyone if we are to lead them successfully through tough times.

Leadership Behaviors for Navigating Challenges

When I was the young leader of a large community college, I was in my top-floor office one day when I suddenly smelled smoke. Before I knew it, all the fire alarms in our 14-story building were going off. Though I was frightened and nervous, I knew I needed to remain calm. Almost immediately, the head of security popped his head into my office. Together, we jumped into action, working the stairwells to ensure students were evacuating the building. When we finally reached the first floor, I waited for some students to exit through the back alley of the building. The head of security grabbed me and said, “No sir, you need to go out the front door.” The front door was all the way on the other side, full of other students and staff trying to exit the building. “They need to see you leave,” continued the head of security. “You need to assure folks that everything is fine. If you are not panicking, they won’t panic either.”

It turns out there was a small fire in the building, but it was restricted to the science classrooms and the fire department soon arrived, so everything was under control. There was no need to head to our off-campus crisis command center and no lives were at risk, but the community needed reassurance that everything was alright. Seeing me walk through the lobby, calm and cool on the outside, was reassuring to our students.

In a moment of crisis, a school leader’s behavior can either be triggering or calming. For this reason, we should be mindful of our

behaviors and reactions to the behaviors of others. The school community expects us (1) to offer comfort and assurance that things will be OK—what psychologists refer to as “holding” or “holding space” (Slochower, 2013), (2) to mind our mood through self-regulation, and (3) to realistically communicate what is happening.

Holding Space

When things get tough or tensions rise, good leaders know how to see their entire school or district as one and interpret its overall “system anxiety.” A school’s system anxiety can be understood or interpreted as a collective feeling of unease or fear among teachers and staff members concerning the turbulent situation. This anxiety could be caused by various factors such as unclear processes, a lack of communication, inadequate resources, or a resistance to change. The idea of “holding” or “holding space,” first introduced by psychologist D. W. Winnocott (Slochower, 2013), is simple. Just as parents hold their children close to their chest when they are sad and afraid, school leaders must “hold” their staff, students, and community close in times of crisis. Of course, I’m not talking about physically holding or hugging someone (though that can help, too) but rather creating a space where people feel that their feelings are valued and their anxieties understood.

Holding institutional space, because of system anxiety, as a leader includes reassuring teachers and staff about their job security, about the decisions they can make about curriculum or professional development, and about whether they are being treated fairly. In my experience, teachers and staff during turbulent times are primarily concerned with what will happen to their jobs. They are then most concerned about the grade levels they are going to teach (i.e., Will they keep teaching the same grade or change to a

different level?) and the need to shift to other mandated academic programs or curriculum (e.g., Will they need to remove something from their curriculum?) When the leadership is aware that curriculum changes will not be necessary, it is one of the first things we should be able to communicate back to our teachers. Leaders hold space by promoting dialogue that lets all individuals participate in making decisions and adapting to new challenges together.

Minding Your Mood

Your mood matters to those you lead, especially during difficult times. Research on leadership development teaches us that our limbic system (the part of the brain involved in our emotional responses) has an open-loop design that lets other people change our emotions (Goleman, 2014). When we first interact with others, our bodies operate at different rhythms. However, after 15 minutes, our physiological profiles look remarkably similar. Researchers have seen again and again that emotions align in this way whenever people are near one another. As far back as 1980, psychologists Howard Friedman and Ronald Riggio found that even nonverbal expressiveness can affect other people (Friedman et al., 1980). For example, when three strangers sit facing one another in silence for a minute or two, the most emotionally expressive of the three transmits their mood to the other two without a single word being spoken.

The same holds true in our schools—we “catch” feelings from one another. Moods that start at the top tend to spread the fastest because everyone is watching the leaders. Research shows that an alarming number of leaders do not really know if they have resonance with their school culture (Walker, 2012). Some school leaders don’t believe their emotions, attitudes, or mood can have an

influence on the entire community. Whether they know it or not, they do: Moods, feelings, and states of mind are highly contagious throughout organizations (Goleman, 2014). Everyone in a school or district can be influenced by the leader's mood, and it is easier to "catch" a mood of anxiety than one of calm and resolve.

Communicating Realistically

When challenges arise, leaders must respond promptly and energetically; teachers, students, and parents need to know that leaders recognize the seriousness of the situation and are committed to addressing it. They must immediately announce that they are making the crisis their absolute priority while explaining that they need time to finalize the best course of action.

Perhaps the most essential element of crisis leadership is clear and trustworthy communication. Research shows that best practices for crisis communication include transparency, honesty, and empathy (Coombs, 2021). Some leaders choose to delay or dilute bad news so as not to worry or demotivate staff. This approach can reflect the leaders' own discomfort or anxiety with the situation. Staff suffer most from uncertainty; they almost always prefer finality to continuously imagining worst-case scenarios.

At the same time, leaders must learn to balance *honest* communication and *open* communication. For example, we should never share sensitive information about individual staff or students or certain types of school data. The best approach is to provide only whatever information is necessary and ensure that it is as relevant and digestible as possible, such as by representing it visually.

All leaders must find the right cadence or rhythm for their communication efforts during difficult times, and providing regular weekly updates can help them to practice doing so. Even if recipients

don't read these updates, they send the message that the leader understands the need to regularly provide them with information.

Conclusion

It would be foolish to think that good old-fashioned IQ, experience in the field, and operational skills are not vital to strong school leadership, but the recipe would not be complete without strong emotional intelligence. The dimensions of emotional intelligence used to be seen as “nice to haves” in business and school leadership, but today we know they are actually “need to haves.” As leaders, we must remove the stigma from leading with emotional intelligence, model the five dimensions, talk about them with students and staff, and look within ourselves for ways to improve. Thankfully, emotional intelligence can be learned. The process may be challenging and time-consuming, but the benefits make it worth the effort.



Reader Reflection

1. Which dimension(s) of emotional intelligence do you find you engage with the most?
2. Which dimension(s) of emotional intelligence do you find yourself needing to improve upon?
3. How can you recognize emotional intelligence in yourself?
4. Do you praise others for having high emotional intelligence? How so?
5. How can you tell if someone has high emotional intelligence?

6. How do you teach others to recognize self-awareness?
7. Do you agree that a school leader's moods and behaviors drive the moods and behaviors of everyone else?
8. Can you think of an example of a way your mood has affected the success of a program or strategy that you've implemented?
9. Can you recall a time when you had to "hold space" for your team? If so, were you successful?
10. How does (or should) empathy manifest itself in your communication style?
11. How does (or should) empathy manifest itself in your social skills?



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About the Author



Ignacio Lopez is an educational psychologist, author, and leader focused on supporting the development of educators and education organizations that embrace inclusive, emotionally intelligent, and culturally relevant learning environments. In his writing, Lopez provides helpful, relevant, and research-based leadership and instructional strategies that help educators challenge their own mindsets and practices toward advancing the academic and social emotional lives of the students they serve.

Over his 20-year education career, Lopez has served as a district advisor, consultant, and researcher in collaboration with several school districts throughout the United States. He has been a high school teacher, administrator, college dean, community college president, and elected school board member in Illinois. Lopez is the author of several articles and of the 2017 ASCD book *Keeping It Real and Relevant: Building Authentic Relationships in Your Diverse Classroom*.

Related ASCD Resources: Emotional Intelligence

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

Becoming a Globally Competent School Leader by Ariel Tichnor-Wagner (#119011)

From Stressed Out to Stress Wise: How You and Your Students Can Navigate Challenges and Nurture Vitality by Abby Wills, Anjali Deva, and Niki Saccareccia (#123004)

Illuminate the Way: The School Leader's Guide to Addressing and Preventing Teacher Burnout by Chase Mielke (#123032)

Keeping It Real and Relevant: Building Authentic Relationships in Your Diverse Classroom by Ignacio Lopez (#117049)

Leadership for Learning: How to Bring Out the Best in Every Teacher, 2nd Edition, by Carl Glickman and Rebecca West Burns (#121007)

The Principal as Chief Empathy Officer: Creating a Culture Where Everyone Grows by Thomas R. Hoerr (#122030)

Taking Social-Emotional Learning Schoolwide: The Formative Five Success Skills for Students and Staff by Thomas R. Hoerr (#120014)

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