

Tea and Empathy with Daniel Goleman by Lawrence M. Fisher

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The author of *Emotional Intelligence*
says business leaders will need
greater interpersonal awareness
in an era of corporate transparency.

Tea and Empathy with Daniel Goleman

by Lawrence M. Fisher



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Corporate carnivores once strode the earth.

They were tough bosses with sobriquets like “Chainsaw Al” (Dunlap), “Neutron Jack” (Welch), and “Irv the Liquidator” (Irwin Jacobs). Though not extinct, the predatory chief executive has been tamed somewhat in the last few years. Even the hardest-edged managers must typically submit to 360-degree appraisals, based on interviews with their colleagues and direct reports, that quantify their emotional competence and assess their skill at dealing with people. More significantly, leaders associated with successful companies these days are known for their ability to be inclusive, responsive, unflappable, and — frankly — mature. In short, in the executive suite, mean and aggressive behavior is no longer seen as a personality trait that pays off.

If anyone deserves credit for bringing about this change in corporate culture, it’s Daniel Goleman. A former Harvard psychologist turned science reporter for the *New York Times* and then best-selling author, Goleman popularized the concept of “emotional intelligence” in the mid-1990s. He has been working with corporate leaders ever since to show how a steady heart and level head can lead to better performance.

“Being a ‘tough guy’ is no longer a winning strategy in organizations,” says Goleman. “It works in the early days of a startup or when people don’t have other choices. But even then it doesn’t work all that well, and the reason is neurological. Aggressiveness is not the optimal physical state for performance. Because emotional states are contagious and emanate from the boss outward, behavior that pitches people into a state of fear or anger also pushes them out of the zone for optimal cognitive efficacy. There may be some sort of narcissist hit to be had in being a bully or a tyrant,

but you’re shooting yourself in the foot.”

Goleman first made this point in his bestseller *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, which was published in 1995 (by Bantam Books) and immediately attracted global press coverage. It went on to sell more than 5 million copies in 33 languages and 50 countries. Perhaps it was the subtitle, which evoked the widespread belief that being “book smart” alone doesn’t guarantee wealth, fame, authority, influence, or any other form of career success; people also need emotional control to rise to the top. Goleman’s elegant prose helped make his book popular. So did the book’s implicit sensitivity to the struggle facing many individuals in their middle years: to overcome their own narcissist impulses and take on the twin challenges of raising families and mastering demanding jobs.

More specifically, and to Goleman’s initial surprise (or so he claims), *Emotional Intelligence* rapidly acquired a following among managers and executives. Anyone who had to oversee a complex project with team members from multiple countries knew firsthand that, in moments of crisis, sheer intelligence was not nearly as valuable as the ability to be level-headed, free of anxiety, self-aware, and empathetic. By 2008, there were 27 books available on Amazon.com with the phrase “emotional intelligence” in the title or subtitle, at least 14 of them aimed directly at businesspeople.

“When *Emotional Intelligence* first came out, I felt I would know it was a success if I overheard two people talking about it,” Goleman says. “Now, if you Google ‘emotional intelligence,’ you get more than 2 million hits.”

Goleman himself published three follow-up books: *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam, 1998);

Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence (with Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, Harvard Business School Press, 2002); and *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (Bantam, 2006). The first two applied his concepts to the workplace; the third looked more closely at the ways in which social interactions — communications with people, especially those with whom there is an emotional connection — produce automatic neural responses in the human brain. Goleman compared these social interactions to thermostats that regulate not just emotions but many other things, including susceptibility to disease (through immune systems) and the kinds of jokes people find funny. As with emotional intelligence, an individual's social capabilities are far more important to success than many people recognize, and social sophistication and influence can be measured, tested, and improved.

“Dan Goleman gave social intelligence a name, he codified it, and he broke out the elements in a usable way,” says Suzy Welch, former editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and coauthor, with her husband, Jack Welch, of *Winning* (Collins, 2005). “The best business executives know that what he’s talking about is just a killer app.”

Goleman's most recent line of inquiry, for a book due from Doubleday in 2009, is on the crisis of accountability that he believes corporations are facing. He argues that as biomedical research explores the health impact of chemicals on a microscopic level, manufacturers will be faced with increasing levels of scrutiny over the long-term health effects of the toxicity of the products they sell. If he is correct, then simply staying in business will require all the emotional intelligence that leaders can muster. It will also require a new calculus for risk: a more in-depth way of judging the potential harm of new endeavors, and a willingness to change those practices rapidly when environmental, social, or health risks appear.

Goleman's preoccupations — transparency, social and emotional learning, leadership, and workplace culture — all show up regularly in the Weblog he started in 2006, which now averages about 750 hits per day. Though his topics vary from business to psychology to education, the basic underlying theme is awareness. People can change, not by controlling or suppressing their emotions, but by becoming more aware of them. (This might mean, for example, regularly asking oneself, “What do I feel, and what do others feel, when I express

rage or anxiety?”) Companies can change by fostering awareness of the world at large. And his current inquiry on risk fits right in; if he's right, corporations and organizations will become more powerful and successful only when people working within them can collectively become more sensitive to the impact of their actions.

And if he's wrong, he's still the guy who introduced the world to the “amygdala hijack.” The amygdalae are two almond-shaped clusters of neurons within the frontal lobes that receive signals directly from the senses and can flush the body with hormones. Goleman compares the amygdala to a primitive sentinel, “telegraphing a message of crisis to all parts of the brain,” and triggering sudden eruptions of anger or fear that people later regret. Those who understand the amygdala's potency and learn to recognize the feeling of a hijack as it is happening are much less likely to be carried away by those emotions, and are thus much less likely to explode in rage. Goleman's version of neuroscience tends to be popular precisely because it helps people learn to modulate their emotions. Is it a natural step, or an overreach, for him to suggest that companies, too, can train themselves to leave behind their own worst impulses?

Aristotle, Darwin, and Harvard

Like many regulars on the global lecture circuit, Goleman is both an exuberant public speaker and an intensely private individual. He makes his home with his wife, Tara Bennett-Goleman, in a remote, woodsy corner of western Massachusetts. In person, he is slender and personable; an avid listener and a graceful conversationalist. Though some people think of his work as promoting artifice, by teaching people to suppress their genuine feelings, Goleman argues that emotional and social intelligence cannot be counterfeited. “If you consciously try to imitate what your body does naturally, you use circuitry that is slower and less skilled,” he says. “Better to trust that your brain knows what it's doing than to manipulate the process. The key is to relax and pay attention, and let the circuitry do its job.”

Emotional intelligence is so well established in contemporary psychology that it has a widely used abbreviation (EI). And the idea dates back at least to Aristotle, who challenged humanity to manage emotional life with intelligence in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Charles Darwin wrote that emotions provide animals with signals to one another that are critically important; those who can't display or read emotions accurately may not survive. The concept also owes much to Goleman's old

friend and Harvard classmate, Howard Gardner, whose theory of multiple intelligences recognized “intrapersonal” intelligence (self-awareness) and “interpersonal” intelligence (the ability to understand others) as distinct forms of capability. In the 1980s, several psychology researchers began using the term *emotional intelligence* in published work; Goleman encountered it in a 1990 article by Yale psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. (“Jack”) Mayer. Salovey and Mayer found that the ability to think dispassionately about one’s passions was correlated with success, or what they called “positive outcomes,” in experiments.

Goleman’s contribution to the new field was synthesis: combining the latest findings from neuroscience with the insights of psychiatric research, presented in deft, commonsense sentences. Readers had a kind of collective “aha!” moment, as if 5 million minds suddenly registered it: “So that’s why my boss, co-workers, spouse, children, neighbors, and I all behave that way.”

In Goleman’s model, emotional intelligence involves four competencies: self-awareness (recognizing a feeling as it happens); self-management (maintaining calm in stressful or unfamiliar situations); social awareness (empathy, organizational awareness, and an orientation toward service); and relationship management (effectively communicating with, influencing, and developing others). Each of the four domains derives from neurological mechanisms, all distinct from one another and from the purely cognitive abilities that are measured by intelligence quotient, or IQ, tests.

Some academic psychologists dismiss Goleman’s work as pop psychology, especially as human brain research expands beyond such concepts as the amygdala hijack. At the mention of “emotional intelligence,” a scholarly conference can erupt into booing, and entire Web sites are devoted to criticizing Goleman as a self-promoter. Some of this carping reflects Goleman’s millions of dollars in book sales, far more than any other researcher in the field has earned. And yet academic psychology increasingly recognizes that emotional intelligence can be studied and measured empirically: There are a number of standardized psychometric tests in place, including one developed by Salovey and Mayer, and endless debate about which is the most relevant.

Salovey, now the dean of Yale College and Chris Argyris Professor of Psychology at Yale University, says that Goleman’s work is credible science journalism and good for the field. Mayer, now a professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, is more

critical. On his emotional intelligence blog, he writes: “[Goleman’s] enlargement of our model...had the unfortunate effect of suggesting to some that nearly every human style or capacity that was not IQ itself was a part of emotional intelligence.” And Goleman himself irritates his critics by continuing to insist that although emotional maturity may not “matter” more than IQ, it is a stronger predictor of leadership competence.

In a recent informal talk to graduate students at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, for instance, Goleman was bathed in affection until he questioned the relevance of their scores, presumably stellar, on the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), which the school requires from many applicants for admission. “How many of you know the correlation between your score on the GMAT and your degree of success in your career?” he asked. After a pause, he gave them the answer: “It’s zero.” When a student in the audience challenged the credibility of that result, Goleman said he was quoting from a study performed there at Harvard, where the average GMAT score is in the 90th percentile.

“The GMAT is a surrogate of IQ,” Goleman added, because it measures analytic abilities. “Getting in the 90th percentile positions you for a career platform that starts out at a very high level.” But, as Goleman explained, everyone else on that career platform has similar cognitive aptitudes: “There’s very little to distinguish you on an intellectual basis. The other aptitudes turn out to matter more for real-world success, because there was no selection pressure for them, and there’s more variation among your peers.”

Mirrors of Maturity

Goleman calls this dynamic the “floor effect.” As smart, well-educated people compete for high-level business positions, they all demonstrate the same baseline of qualifying cognitive abilities. Only their emotional qualities can distinguish them. Moreover, low levels of empathy and poor self-management skills may not be visible in many organizations until solo performers rise to positions of leadership — and then create the kind of destructive atmosphere that brings everyone’s performance down. Thus, in high-tech companies, Goleman notes, successful software programmers often founder when they are asked to lead product development teams. “This is also rife in newsrooms,” he adds, recalling Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters he has known who were promoted to editor positions, where they per-

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formed miserably. In academia, an equivalent would be a star research scientist who cannot cope with the social demands of a department chair position; in the corporate world, it would be the successful salesperson failing as vice president of sales.

Fortunately, says Goleman, EI can be learned. (This sets it apart from IQ, which is generally thought to be static in people from birth.) An individual can acquire competence, stability, and self-possession over time; the first step is to regularly pay attention to the subtleties latent in ordinary conversation. Hence the value of executive coaches, who can act as a mirror and foster emotional and social awareness.

The business value of this kind of personal growth is backed by a large and growing body of research. Vanessa Urch Druskat, an associate professor of organizational behavior and management at the Whittemore School of Business & Economics at the University of New Hampshire, has reviewed more than 200 doctoral dissertations and 30 peer-reviewed articles on this subject. “Overwhelmingly, they tell us that EI is linked to performance,” she says. “You see that over and over again.”

Unfortunately, Druskat says, the long-term benefits of emotional intelligence are often undermined by corporate realities like executive turnover. In one project, she spent two years helping a major consumer products company improve team performance. “But then there was a change of management at the top of the organization, a couple of key people got laid off, and subsequently nothing has been done with it,” she says. Indeed, skeptics argue that even if emotional intelligence makes a difference, it will always be stunted by modern organizations. “One thing Goleman doesn’t talk

about is that being put in a position of power drains the emotional intelligence from most people,” says Robert I. Sutton, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business and the author of *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t* (Warner Business Books, 2007). “They become more focused on satisfying their own needs and less on the needs of others, and they start acting as if the rules don’t apply to them.”

The counterargument, put forth by Goleman and his colleagues, is that the practice of building emotional intelligence in individuals ripples out to change the larger corporate culture. “It is playing out everywhere,” says Richard Boyatzis, a professor of organizational behavior at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, and coauthor, with Goleman and Annie McKee, of *Primal Leadership*. “Although there are not a huge number of companies that would say they give EI training, if you ask, ‘Do you promote or screen on the basis of empathy, teamwork, or network building?’ they all say, ‘Definitely.’ It’s become pretty much universal.”

Odyssey of a Participant–Observer

The value of social intelligence was apparent to Dan Goleman early in his life. Born in 1946, he grew up in a Jewish, intellectual household in Stockton, an agricultural town in California’s central valley. Both his parents were professors at the University of the Pacific: his mother in sociology and his father in humanities. (One of his father’s students was jazz musician Dave Brubeck, who later wrote an oratorio in the elder Goleman’s honor.) Daniel grew up feeling like a “participant–observer” in his hometown. “I was the only



kid I knew with lots of books at home,” he recalls.

Yet he was sufficiently popular in high school to be elected student body president, a position that helped gain him a scholarship to Amherst College. A Ford Foundation fellowship then took him to Harvard for graduate school in psychology. There his mentor, and sometime landlord, was David McClelland, author of *The Achieving Society* (Van Nostrand, 1961) and perhaps the first author to propose that career performance is related to a range of abilities and not just logic or analysis. (McClelland’s original work on competencies led to much of the skill-based assessment and evaluation methodology used by corporations today.) McClelland’s large Cambridge home was known for loud parties that carried on late into the night, and Goleman dates some

of his closest friendships from those evenings.

While at Harvard in the late 1960s, Goleman began practicing transcendental meditation; he spent a year in India studying with Buddhist scholars. His doctoral thesis was on meditation, as was his first book, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience* (St. Martin’s Press, 1988). He has since edited two books of conversations between scientists and the Dalai Lama. “I realized there were these elaborate systems of psychology, some of them millennia old,” he says. “I wanted to draw attention to these Eastern systems, and I made a bet that this would be important in Western psychology, but I was too early.”

The Harvard psychology faculty was not impressed, and he obtained only a low-level, non-tenure track

teaching engagement there. Frustrated, he left to join the staff of the magazine *Psychology Today*, where his work eventually caught the eye of a science editor at the *New York Times*. He published more than 500 articles about psychology in the *Times* between 1984 and 1996, often with a focus on the workplace. (One of his first, published January 31, 1984, was headlined, “Boss seen as best buffer against stress.”) But the *Times*, like Harvard, never gave him a staff position, and when he wrote at length about emotional intelligence for the paper’s Sunday magazine, the article was killed. Then his book appeared, *Time* magazine featured him on its cover, and sales took off.

The runaway success of *Emotional Intelligence* changed the lives of everyone involved, even the people whose work Goleman briefly described within. Howard Gardner had been well known in academic circles, but was hardly accustomed to fielding calls from talk-show hosts. Peter Salovey and Jack Mayer found that the sudden spotlight on their work brought a mixture of welcome recognition and uncomfortable intrusion. As a cottage industry of self-described emotional intelligence coaches and consultants emerged, the research psychologists who had first coined the term found themselves cast in the role of guardians of its credibility.

“Very rudimentary ways to measure emotional intelligence started to appear that were clearly not accurate,” says Salovey. “When we saw some of [the less substantiated work] starting to be used by scientists, we became alarmed. So we became very involved in developing scientifically tested psychometric studies to measure EI.” That, in turn, led to a renewed focus on the measurability of emotional intelligence.

Goleman, meanwhile, quit writing for the *New York*

Times to focus on books and cofounding a new research organization: the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (CREIO). Gradually, he expanded his interest to cover broader concepts of emotional intelligence — first in organizations and communities, and then in society at large. He is particularly interested in advancing children’s development and influencing schools. At the Kennedy School gathering, he was asked why people often seem to lose their empathy and compassion when they advance to positions of power. Goleman replied that they had simply never acquired the exceptional emotional intelligence that leaders in high positions need. “I would give up on our current flock of leaders and start with kids,” he added. “The real window of opportunity for this set of abilities is in the first 20 years of life.”

In addition to CREIO, Goleman cofounded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, which is focused on programs for preschool through high school. In a recently published meta-analysis project, CASEL, based at the University of Illinois at Chicago, found that young people who participated in after-school programs on “social and emotional learning” (SEL) showed significant improvement in their attendance and behavior. High school seniors showed a 15 percent gain in standardized test scores after SEL, which represents a greater boost than coaching services for the tests typically deliver.

“SEL helps kids master their emotions so they’re in the internal state that’s ideal for learning,” Goleman says. “That’s why Singapore is making SEL training mandatory. Singapore is really a corporation disguised as a country — and they see this as enhancing their human capital.” Goleman notes that SEL programs are also now

“The executives who make the best decisions,” says Goleman, “are the ones who spend time reflecting, though that may be the time they spend riding their Harleys.”

offered in New York and Illinois and that several other states are considering implementing such programs. He adds with a smile that since CASEL's chairman, Timothy Shriver, is the brother-in-law of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the chances are good that California will also embrace mandatory SEL training.

The Transparent Company

Goleman's 2006 book, *Social Intelligence*, drew on advances in brain studies to expand from the neuroscience of personal emotions to more complex interactions among people. It describes such intriguing phenomena as “mirror neurons,” which are highly specialized brain cells that attune people to the attitudes and moods of those around them — for example, signaling a couple that the moment is right for a first kiss.

The link between social connection and neural response is visible because of new technology, in particular functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which can produce real-time video images of the brain as people interact with one another. These images reveal an exquisite circuitry devoted to social engagements, often instantaneous and nonverbal. We are “wired to connect,” as Goleman puts it, and that has profound implications for personal and professional relationships. As with emotional intelligence, the most profound insight may well involve plasticity: With greater attention and self-awareness, people can learn to develop better social skills, and their neural patterns will adjust accordingly.

In other words, to improve both social and emotional intelligence, people must cultivate mindfulness — becoming intentionally aware of thoughts and actions, particularly in the present moment. Many mindfulness

practices involve meditation in some form, and Goleman has never lost his interest in it. Although he doesn't consider himself a Buddhist, he sits every day in a form of Tibetan Buddhist meditation; in his Berkshire home, he has built a replica of a Japanese teahouse at the top of a set of stone stairs. In addition, he leads workshops with his wife, Tara, based on her book, *Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart* (Harmony Books, 2001).

“There is a definite connection between Dan's meditative development and the things that he writes about,” says his friend Jon Kabat-Zinn, director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and author of *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* (Hyperion, 2005.) “He is able to make these issues come alive and normalize them so they don't seem to require people to make unusual cultural shifts that they are otherwise not ready for.”

To Goleman, meditation is simply one form of training in self-awareness. “The executives who make the best decisions,” he says, “are the ones who spend time by themselves reflecting, though that may be the time they spend riding their Harleys. Meditation helps one get into a mode of mind where the background information processing, which is the wisest part of the mind, can rise to the surface, and you get the ‘aha’ of decisions you've been pondering. Personally, I've found it enormously helpful.”

Goleman's book in progress reflects his current fascination with something he alternately calls “compassionate capitalism” or “the new transparency.” “Right now, when we buy a consumer product, we have no idea

of what the consequences of manufacture of that product are for the planet, public health, or people at large,” he says. “But that is about to change.” In the past decade, companies that pollute or employ child labor have found documentation of or commentary on these transgressions trumpeted on the Web sites of activists and nongovernmental organizations. The substance of these accusations may vary; they may be subject to interpretation; and the company may or may not, in the end, be vindicated. But the visibility of once-hidden activities and long-term health effects is certain to grow, and as people around the world grow more accustomed to this type of information, corporate response to social and health issues will move from the public relations department to the arena of core strategy.

“The market is out of sync with where medical science is heading in assessing hazards,” Goleman adds. He points, for example, to the increasing flow of data about the adverse health consequences of regular exposure to chemicals found in a host of everyday products. “When Oprah Winfrey and *60 Minutes* spotlight these dangers, we will see a spike in consumer alarm — successful brands will be tainted — and major market shifts will likely follow.”

Gradually, corporate leaders will come to assume that the impact of all their activities — the impact on the planet, on people, and on the economy — will be visible. “It’s not just your carbon footprint, it’s every resource you use: the extraction, the processing, the consumption of it, and what happens when it is discarded,” says Goleman. “Businesses will need to make strategic decisions based on the assumption that people will know the consequences of everything they do.”

Savvy companies will turn this development to their advantage, Goleman predicts, by using technology to boost their awareness of their own operations, with finer granularity than ever before. For example, as radio frequency identification (RFID) technology beams to manufacturing companies the location of their goods at every part of the value chain, including their customers’ homes, the “consumer insight” they gain will not just make them better marketers. It will raise ethical issues about the value of their products in society at large. And this, in turn, will require some emotional intelligence on the part of executives who want to make the transition. In the end, it may be emotional intelligence that provides businesspeople with the fortitude, transparency, and compassion they need to blend their personal ambitions with their desire to serve the world at large. We

may not fully grasp the challenges facing business over the next few decades, but if Goleman is right, corporate leaders may want to build up, alongside cash and technology, their reserves of maturity and awareness. ✦

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Resources

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Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations Web site, www.eiconsortium.org: Provides links to a variety of books, articles, and ideas.

Daniel Goleman’s Web site, www.danielgoleman.info: Includes his Weblog, podcasts (for example, a conversation with Google.org’s Larry Brilliant on “compassionate capitalism”), and overviews of the field.

The Global NeuroLeadership Summits Web site, www.neuroleadership.org: Institute and summits that bring together brain science and organizational and leadership practice.

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