

Emotional Intelligence

Diane Weston

Practical advice on managing your relationships, starting with managing yourself.

Diane Weston wins my affection immediately by acknowledging that emotional intelligence is not the same as general intelligence. Some people are born with more than others, but it is a quality that can be improved with effort.

There is no argument that people who are successful in interpersonal relations will be more successful in just about every aspect of life. The ability to deal with people goes under the broad heading of Emotional Intelligence – EI for short.

Weston dodges the issue of whether or not emotional intelligence is a real construct. In contrast, the intelligence measured by IQ tests is almost universally agreed to be real. There are first level abilities, such as the ability to learn a foreign language, breadth of vocabulary, the ability to compute discount percentages in one's head or the ability to learn one's way around a new city. These abilities are usually quite highly correlated within each category. They can thus be rolled up into what are called constructs, a higher level general measurement.

For the purpose of measuring intelligence, they are generally rolled up into three second-level constructs: verbal intelligence, spatial intelligence and mathematical intelligence. These three constructs are, in turn, quite highly correlated as well. Rolling the three of them together one arrives at g, general intelligence, that latent ability that IQ tests are designed to measure. Though, one hastens to add, they never measure it exactly.

Returning to Weston's point, whether or not Emotional Intelligence is measurable doesn't matter, because unlike the intelligence of IQ tests, it is something an individual can change. That's what the book is about.

Before leaving the notion of scientifically analyzing emotional intelligence, Weston talks about the models used to define it. The ability model focuses on a person's ability to recognize emotions in self and others. Daniel Goleman's mixed model includes both awareness and self-management – knowing what's going on, and doing something about it. The trait model simply ascribes emotional intelligence to personality. Since personality traits are largely inherited, this model would suggest that they are less amenable to change. That's simply not a useful premise for Weston's book. Popular culture (the movie "Anger Management" for instance) holds that we can improve our EI.

Weston starts with a definition of emotions. A bit more science would be in order here. Emotions have deep roots in our evolutionary history. Our primate relatives all exhibit emotions, most of them quite similar to ours. She notes that emotions may protect us. Fear helps us avoid danger, but love and trust as well help us to secure assistance when we need it. Emotions come and go – they are products of our hormones, adrenal system and other chemical structures of the body. Lastly, Weston questions that emotions are bad bosses. Every married person knows that there are times when we are elated by our spouse's presence and times we wish they would die. You can't let the emotions take charge – you have to recognize them for the changeable things that they are.

Weston now starts with advice: things you can control which are your thoughts, habits and perceptions. You can choose how to react to something unpleasant. My wife says something cutting about a dirty dish in the drainer. I can snap back that if she didn't like it, she could wash the dishes herself. Or, say to myself she's grumpy because the baby didn't let her sleep last night and let it go. That's under my control.

Weston notes that our habits can repeatedly put us in positions where our emotions are triggered. She cites sugar highs from junk food and, road rage from our commute. Moral of the story? Control your habits. Bicycle to work, riding serenely past those fools fuming in their steel boxes while you enjoy fresh air and exercise.

These things build on each other, contributing to a worldview. The benefits of a positive worldview are obvious.

Weston codifies these into four R's:

- Recognition of your own emotions
- Regulation of your reactions when your emotions are triggered
- Reading signals – cues that other people are giving off about their emotions

- Responding – after assimilating the above, come up with appropriate responses to other people.

The balance of the book is dedicated to practical approaches to implementing the 4R's. They include a number of checklists, mental exercises you can do to make yourself more aware of what's going on and how you are reacting and behaving.

She writes about how you can protect yourself from other people's emotions, and perhaps help others as well. Mothers have a knack for chafing on their adult daughters. A woman needs to steel herself, rationalizing that that's the way mom is, is not going to change, and I love her anyway. A child will manipulate you by crying and wheedling. Recognize it for what it is, call it for what it is, and don't give in.

Weston recognizes that while some people have too little empathy, some have too much. "Pathological Altruism" is a book dedicated to the topic.

This concise self-help book will help you make better decisions in managing your life. It is worth the investment of a couple hours to read. Five stars.