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Recent Research of Note

# A review of *Becoming a Resonant Leader* (McKee, Boyatzis, and Johnston): contextualizing the place of Emotional Intelligence skills with respect to team leadership and group dynamics

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## Abstract

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## Introduction

*Becoming a Resonant Leader* (2008) by Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis, and Frances Johnston arrives in the marketplace with a noteworthy pedigree. First in the line was *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) by Daniel Goleman, the best-selling volume that promoted the constructive handling of emotions for personal development and social effectiveness. That work spawned *Primal Leadership* (2002) by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, which analyzed the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in leadership, and emphasized the critical contribution of leaders who channel emotions in positive directions to support high organizational performance. *Resonant Leadership* (2005) by Boyatzis and McKee followed, outlining a strategy for leaders to sustain the drive for positive emotions in the workplace, despite the effects of burnout that many experience from the pressures and demands of their leadership roles. Essentially, this new edition is a “how-to” workbook that follows up on its more theoretical predecessor, *Resonant Leadership*.

This series of books has as part of its foundation the academic writing of Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990). The two authors first introduced the construct “EI”, and presented a framework for the accurate appraisal and effective regulation of emotion. When Goleman published his book in the mid-1990s, it helped to popularize these ideas, and it became an international bestseller. Since that time, there has been an increasing debate about how to



define and assess EI (Daus and Ashkanasy, 2003; Mayer, 2006; Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2008). Nevertheless, it is evident that the books by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee have had a major impact on the way people view and understand personal development, leadership functions, teamwork, and organizational climate. The volumes have helped to create a greater awareness about the vital power of emotions for inspiring and motivating people, building interpersonal rapport, and boosting teamwork and productivity. They have also helped to strike a balance between the logical, analytical thinking that drives the business and professional world, and an appreciation for the affective realm that can provide the indispensable glue that creates the synergy through which a team or organization climbs to a much higher level of performance. Indeed, during the last two decades this approach to EI has provided applications that have benefited many leaders and organizations.

With *Becoming a Resonant Leader*, McKee, Boyatzis, and Johnston have expanded on the practical applications for their model of EI in a meaningful way. While *Resonant Leadership* explained in detail the ideas that ground this approach and offered a variety of exercises to assist the reader in personal development, *Becoming a Resonant Leader* presents a more thorough system for achieving deeper self-understanding and for acquiring the competencies that will make one a more emotionally-aware, capable leader.

### **Concept development in this series of EI literature**

Before analyzing more closely the relationship between these two volumes and assessing the contribution of *Becoming a Resonant Leader*, it would be useful to review briefly some of the critical concepts articulated in the aforementioned sequence of books. In *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman presented an array of research about the impact of positive and negative emotions on people's physical, psychological, and social well-being. At the end of the book, he described a five-part model for emotional literacy. Self-Awareness focused on the ability to understand one's own emotions. Managing Emotions addressed the ability to handle effectively one's positive and negative feelings. Harnessing Emotions Productively targeted the ability to pursue goals with energy and persistence. Empathy emphasized the ability to understand other people's emotions and to respond constructively to their emotional reac-

tions. Handling Relationships stressed the ability to effectively manage interpersonal relationships, and to develop rapport with people. The goal of this system was to help an individual cultivate a mature approach for harnessing positive emotional energy – within oneself and in relations with others.

In applying this approach to leadership functions in *Primal Leadership*, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee transformed this design, reducing the domains from five to four and subsuming 18 competencies under the four domains. Self-Awareness addressed emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. Self-Management included self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement, initiative, and optimism. Social Awareness encompassed empathy, organizational awareness, and service. Relationship Management focused on inspiration, influence, developing others, being a catalyst for change, conflict management, and promoting teamwork and collaboration. This model became the template for their EI skill-building.

As part of the discussion, the authors coined the term “resonant leader”. Such a leader, utilizing the various skills outlined above, stays attuned to the feelings of others and seeks to move people in positive emotional directions. This leader uses personal passion, authenticity, and enthusiasm to inspire others, and employs empathy and caring to stay in touch with others' concerns and needs. The aim is to establish a mutual comfort level between a leader and team members, fostering meaningful rapport and productive collaboration. When a mutual comfort level exists, the authors point out that people share ideas, learn from one another, make shared decisions, and get results more quickly and more competently. On the other hand, they note that a “dissonant leader” is one who does not establish resonance and who remains out of touch with others' feelings. Such a leader can often fuel negative emotions (e.g., anger and frustration), and usually creates a negative atmosphere in which people are off-balance and do not perform at their best. In this situation, team members' motivation, communication, and productivity generally suffer.

After analyzing these two leadership styles, the *Primal Leadership* authors went on to describe an approach to personal development using their EI model in conjunction with Boyatzis's Theory of Self-Directed Learning. This self-development system, targeting skills for resonant leadership, advised an individual to do the following: define one's ideal self (who I want to be); identify one's real self (where I am now – current strengths and

gaps from my ideal self); set a learning agenda (build on strengths and reduce gaps); experiment with new behaviors; and practice the new behaviors to develop mastery. The authors presented a thoughtful analysis of these steps and offered suggestions on how a reader might begin to apply them. But while they made a provocative case for resonant leadership and provided a useful outline for personal development, it seemed that with respect to individual development the discussion needed more – more detail, more structure, and more explanation. For a person who wanted to apply this model in the real world, there needed to be more structured guidance on how to develop and refine the essential EI competencies. That became part of the mission for *Resonant Leadership*.

In this next volume, Boyatzis and McKee enlarged on their theory of resonant leadership. They noted that even leaders who capably apply EI techniques and achieve the desired resonance with their colleagues, employees, and teams can be subject to work overload and burnout, and then stumble into dissonance with deleterious effects. Given the intense pressures preying on leaders in contemporary society, it is no surprise that emotionally-aware, intelligent people can lose their focus. The authors pointed out that in a leader's giving of oneself, he or she can give too much, ultimately falling into the Sacrifice Syndrome, in which the tank goes empty and the leader becomes ineffective. As crises and threats mount, overextended leaders can readily lose touch with their inner emotional reality and with the emotional reality of others. Personal and professional life can turn emotionally toxic for them.

What can a leader do to avoid this trap? Boyatzis and McKee proposed a path for resonance and renewal, a way that will help replenish the tank and keep leaders vital and effective. In explaining their strategy, the authors return to their personal development model first described in *Primal Leadership*, but then expand their analysis to include a discussion of several new elements – mindfulness, hope, and compassion. They envision mindfulness as the capacity to pay close attention to what one experiences in all parts of the self – body, mind, and spirit. With a holistic orientation, a leader tries to monitor and nurture these essential elements of personhood. Hope addresses the capacity to remain optimistic and excited in the face of difficult, challenging events; this is not a hope expressed in some Pollyanna fashion, but rather one tempered with realism and reasonable doubt. Compassion, finally, is the ability to put empathy and caring into

action, a reaching out to others that supports their personal growth. Compassion becomes the inspiration for a leader's genuine interest in others, an interest that seeks to listen closely to people and to foster their development. By cultivating the traits of mindfulness, hope, and compassion, the authors maintain that a leader can retain resonance and avoid the burnout that undermines EI efficacy.

Boyatzis and McKee introduced a wide range of exercises along with their theoretical discussion in the 2005 volume. They presented such items as: self-assessment material related to the Sacrifice Syndrome; an exercise to define one's personal vision; activities to aid one in the cultivation of mindfulness, hope, and compassion; and an appendix with an array of additional activities to assist in personal advancement. These exercises readily enable a reader to put into practice the ideas identified in the book.

### **Components of *Becoming a Resonant Leader***

*Becoming a Resonant Leader* takes the next step in this progression, offering a broader range of exercises and a more sophisticated approach for personal skill development. As noted earlier, it is a "how-to" workbook for applying this model of EI in one's life and leadership roles. The new book articulates a more intricate approach for skill acquisition while reviewing the work of the previous books in a style more accessible to the general reader. But how, exactly, do the authors extend their system for EI self-development in this latest work? They begin with a deeper analysis of how one understands leadership. An individual is encouraged to examine, in detail, personal beliefs about leadership, best and worst role models, how the best leaders may reflect the qualities of resonant leadership, and what is necessary for inspirational leadership. An individual is also guided in self-reflection about his or her leadership style, and how that style may vary depending on the group – family, business, professional, or community. There is also a self-analysis about where one stands on the continuum of resonant leadership skills. This approach promotes a multi-dimensional self-evaluation of personal beliefs, experiences, and patterns of leadership behavior that provides a very solid foundation for future personal development. It enables the reader to assess numerous leadership issues with a critical focus on EI skills and leadership functions. As the authors proclaim, it sets the stage for the pursuit of intentional change that will foster a practice of reflection and ongoing development.



The book includes a series of exercises that take the reader into a deeper analysis of personal strengths, challenges, emotional patterns, social identity, and social network. As with the previous EI literature, *Becoming a Resonant Leader* addresses an individual's internal mode of operation and external social relations. The aim is to create greater affective awareness in both realms and to provide for a well-rounded developmental process. The latter part of the book concentrates on the areas of teams, organizations, and communities, the very places in which a leader seeks to ignite resonance. At that point, the authors have brought their approach into a clear, practical focus with respect to some of the principal contexts for business and professional leadership.

To illustrate the authors' approach, two exercises from this workbook provide helpful examples. The Leadership Self-Study exercise (p. 139) asks a reader to conduct 10 interviews with key informants from the individual's personal and work life, with the objective of obtaining a broad range of perspectives from both realms. The goal is to see how significant others view the reader's leadership behavior in order to gain insights and improve performance. During the interview process, a person will ask the informants what they notice about his or her actions, things they appreciate, and things they believe could be done differently to increase interpersonal effectiveness. The interviewer collects notes and later reviews all of the interview data, looking for the consistent themes that emerge across the conversations. The interviewer ultimately constructs a personal report identifying important themes and insights. The report provides meaningful perspectives on the individual's social behavior, which serve as a basis for future EI leadership development.

The Personal Balance Sheet exercise (p. 150) guides the reader in constructing a summary of personal EI assets and liabilities. Under the heading of assets, an individual lists My Distinctive Strengths (one's known strengths), My Potential Strengths (things one could do better with greater attention and effort), and My Enduring Dispositions That Support Me (traits, habits, and behaviors that help one to be successful and that won't be changed). Under the heading of liabilities, an individual outlines My Weaknesses (problem areas where one would like to do better), Weaknesses I Want to Change (problem areas that one definitely wishes to change), and My Enduring Dispositions That Sometimes Get in My Way (traits, habits, and

behaviors that one doesn't want to change but sometimes cause one to be less effective). In creating this personal inventory, an individual draws on information obtained by completing the various EI exercises in the text. The process enables a person to concretely assess the pluses and minuses in performance, and make practical decisions about personal objectives for strengthening EI competencies.

*Becoming a Resonant Leader* has brought a new thoroughness and completeness to the process of leadership skill development as defined by this series of EI literature. An individual can more fully evaluate personal patterns of leadership with keen attention to the emotional domain. The book provides a systematic structure for self-analysis that helps readers to determine their current skill levels and to make informed decisions on the particular skills that are most relevant for their specific situations. It encourages a customized plan for personal advancement. One can then strategically practice new skills, work towards acquiring proficiency, and over time, by acquiring a variety of fresh skills, evolve into a well-rounded, efficacious EI practitioner. The book does a fine job of balancing the intra-personal and social aspects of this approach, ultimately bringing the analysis to bear with teams, organizations, and communities. Most critically, it helps to foster a reflective *praxis* that is at the core of all personal and professional development. When an individual conscientiously pursues these skills and increases his or her effectiveness, that individual can then model this developmental process for others, which, in turn, is a valuable leadership practice.

In recent years I have taught a MBA course entitled *Team Leadership*, which included *Primal Leadership* in the curriculum. The exercises in *Primal Leadership* assisted the students in reflecting on their patterns of behavior and identifying important skills to work on. With the addition of *Becoming a Resonant Leader*, students or others going through leadership training would be able to use an even more sophisticated set of exercises for self-evaluation and skill acquisition.

### **EI skills with respect to team leadership and group dynamics**

It might be worthwhile here to contextualize the place the EI skills have in the larger picture of team leadership. Without question, the EI competencies address very significant aspects of group life – the

emotional and the interpersonal. To build strong teamwork, it is essential to attend these areas. But there is also the equally important flip side – the task domain – that requires the logical construction of work strategies and their implementation. The EI leadership model contends that when there is a comfortable rapport between a leader and team members, the smooth communication that results will support task achievement. That is true. Yet a close examination of the skills related to logical task analysis and task implementation would extend the precision and quality of what a strongly cohesive team might accomplish. It is as simple as saying that the affective and cognitive domains in psychology balance each other. The EI skills make a vital contribution on the affective side, but they need to be balanced by a strong cognitive (thinking) approach targeting the work itself. When a leader and a team bring together both of these elements, their performance should rise to an exceptional level.

My own research has been in the area of leadership and small-group dynamics. Through 20 years of study, I have tracked the interplay of team leadership and team membership across the two fundamental domains of group life – task and interpersonal. (Klein, 2007). This approach followed the classic theory of small-group dynamics espoused by R.F. Bales in the 1950s (1950/1976, 1953) examining group task vs group maintenance issues. Now generally considered a bedrock theory in the field, Bales' theory states that a team begins with a task and, as members logically work on it, there can be differing opinions on how to get the job done. When opposing strategies and positions are expressed, tensions among the members can emerge, creating emotional conflicts. It then becomes necessary for the members to attend to emotional issues in the group with the goal of maintaining positive relations among the participants and sustaining a team effort with the task. As a team conducts its work, according to Bales, it will go back and forth in attending to these two elements in order to get the job done, creating a fundamental group dynamic.

With his keen eye, Bales observed some basic tensions that occur when people work together. The tensions begin in task collaboration and ripple into interpersonal relations. The EI authors are absolutely correct in saying that emotional toxicity will disrupt, if not destroy, teamwork. This is just what Bales noticed. So the maintenance of emotional harmony in the group is a primary goal. But

when that harmony exists, the group will naturally zero in on the task at hand, and will want to develop nuanced strategies with flexible applications using analytical thinking. Task and interpersonal elements stand at opposite poles, so that as a leader and team focus on one, they tend to take their eyes off the other. The need arises to go back and forth in attending to both, creating a basic rhythm in teamwork that a competent leader or group member will notice and address. Although many theorists since Bales have done meaningful analysis of these elements, such as EI in the affective and interpersonal domains, the fundamental dynamic that Bales described remains true to team life.

My research has long indicated that the three elements of leadership, task, and interpersonal relations could be supported by a fourth separate element – negotiation (Klein, 2007). My aim was to examine the negotiation process as it applied both to task and interpersonal concerns within a group dynamics context. When group members are working on a task, they need to negotiate strategies they can agree on, recognizing that it may not always be possible to achieve consensus. When consensus can be attained – with all members fully committed to the work – the group has the greatest potential to achieve a successful outcome. Of course, if consensus cannot be reached, then negotiation helps to establish some reasonable compromise. Likewise, when interpersonal misunderstandings or conflicts occur, negotiation has a role to play in sorting out the problems and getting relationships back on a positive path. Or, as the EI authors say, if the leader is seeking to draw on the positive energy of the membership to channel it towards high productivity, negotiation would be relevant as one tries to understand where the positive energy resides in each of the team members and to bring those energies together in a more unified stream. A team that is united in this way has a much greater likelihood of creating the synergy that will produce results surpassing those that would have been accomplished by the individual members alone – which is always the goal of authentic teamwork. A constructive win-win approach can be fruitfully applied to negotiations in both the task and interpersonal areas of small-group life. As a person works to develop the EI competency of promoting teamwork, the conscious use of a win-win negotiation method in the task and interpersonal domains can significantly enhance the individual's effectiveness as a leader.



## Conclusion

To conclude, the EI literature by Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee, and Johnston has made a meaningful contribution to the way we view effective leadership behavior. They have raised awareness about emotional competencies that have often been overlooked and neglected. This latest volume, *Becoming a Resonant Leader* by McKee, Boyatzis, and Johnston, offers a valuable workbook to guide people in the acquisition of these competencies. Building on the previous works in this series, it presents a more sophisticated model for personal skill development while attending to the intra-personal and social aspects of this process as well as addressing issues related to families, teams, organizations, and communities. With its help readers can cultivate a reflective *praxis* that will support ongoing personal growth and promote long-term EI development.

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## About the author

**Robert R Klein**, Ed.D., did his doctoral work at Harvard University where he studied human development, psychology, and the learning and teaching process related to the instruction of group skills. He has trained people in leadership and group skills across the United States, and in Europe and Asia. In 2007, he published his assessment tool, the Klein Group Instrument: for Effective Leadership and Participation in Teams (KGI), through the Center for Applications of Psychological Type ([www.capt.org](http://www.capt.org)) in Gainesville, FL. Robert is currently a professor at Western New England College (Springfield, MA) where he teaches in the education, psychology, and business management programs. He can be reached at [robtklein@juno.com](mailto:robtklein@juno.com).