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How could I defend such a position in the face of conventional wisdom that emotional intelligence (EI) is a key to life success? All too often we have heard a story that goes like this:

“We all know examples of smart people who failed. Having a high IQ—the academic sort—may land you the position; however, book smarts will not make you a successful leader. You need that “something” to help you in difficult situations, to manage your emotions, and those of others. Decades of research shows that what differentiates the best from the mediocre is EI. Our own data show that 90% of the star performers are high in EI, which is far more important for life success than is IQ. The best news of all is that we can reliably measure EI as well as help you develop it.”

The slick sales pitch is then supplanted with client lists, testimonials of how EI selection or training helped organizations, and further statements about their propriety EI test’s validity. Add to that claims that the EI test is unique and measures something rather different from conventional IQ and personality tests. I bet many readers have heard this familiar story. However, does this evidence stack up? What does the science say?

The science is not clear about what EI actually means and if it is a valid concept¹. Is it an ability, akin to IQ, but focused on emotions? Is it like a personality trait, capturing stable patterns of behaviors? Or is best seen as a “mixed” approach—a hodgepodge of abilities, skills, traits, attitudes, self-motivation, and so forth?

Although there is much disagreement about what EI actually is or what it should measure, the academic literature mostly supports the view that it should be measured as an ability, though this approach still faces many difficulties¹. Measuring it as a trait or using a mixed approach does not provide anything new or unique. The mixed approach, which is what consulting companies selling propriety measures typically embrace (like that of my debating opponent Travis Bradberry), is a “black box”² really; closely scrutinizing such measures, as done in a large

scale meta-analysis³ published in a top psychology journal, shows that when controlling⁴ for established constructs like (e.g., IQ, personality, self-efficacy) the “mixed EI–job performance relationship becomes nil”². Meta-analytic results in other domains like leadership also show dismal predictive validity for EI¹.

HR practitioners need valid measures for selection; it is the economical and ethical thing to do. They cannot rely on those who sell products—and who have clear conflicts of interest—to also report on the apparent validity of their propriety measures and propriety data. Such claims are credible only if the academic community has scrutinized them. At this time, and after lots of robust research, the best predictors of leadership and performance still are good old IQ and personality¹.

Notes:

¹ <http://emotionresearcher.com/emotional-intelligence-the-hype-the-hope-the-evidence/>

² <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037681>

³ A meta-analysis is a quantitative synthesis of studies

⁴ Predicting performance only from EI may give a biased estimate of this relation; the relation may be explained by IQ, which could be a common predictor of EI and performance. “Controlling for IQ” means that we “take out” the effect of IQ on performance to test the unique effect of EI on performance.