

Is there a Dark Side to Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence is a critical leadership skill. But what happens when the leader's motivation is less than benign?

In the Showtime series “Billions,” U.S. attorney Chuck Rhoades is determined to expose Wall Street corruption and bring down hedge fund king, Bobby (“Axe”) Axelrod, owner of Axe Capital. The two alpha men play a high-stakes game of cat and mouse that gets ever more nasty and complex. “Everyone wants to be a lion. Most people never get the chance,” Axe says. And while Axe’s business dealings cross the line and result in ruined lives, he is well-loved in his company, showing great generosity and great loyalty...when it suits him.

Meanwhile Chuck Rhoades, who considers himself morally driven, a man who ‘works for the people,’ can’t seem to get along with anyone. He alienates his dedicated staff, fights with his father, angers his boss, and becomes estranged from his wife. Even with his career in tatters, his obsession with Axe consumes him. So who do we root for? The calm, likeable, but ruthless billionaire? Or the flawed, bad-tempered “good guy” willing to do anything to take him down?

Leaders with a high degree of emotional intelligence understand and manage their emotions. They demonstrate awareness of what other people feel and convey empathy. Rutgers psychologist Daniel Goleman, whose 1995 best-selling book “Emotional Intelligence” spread the concepts of EI worldwide, is convinced that EI is perhaps the most critical skill a leader can have, more important than high IQ or technical skills.

In an ideal world, a leader’s high level of EI benefits his/her company, employees, and customers. But this is not always the case. A business environment that fosters

competition instead of cooperation can tempt its leaders to behave as though the rules that govern others don't apply to them. Tips for leaders to avoid costly missteps:

- Remember that the leadership team sets the tone for the entire organization.
- Build trust and connections with others by being consistent, following through on your word, delivering promised outcomes, and making expectations clear.
- Recognize that employees sooner or later detect insincerity, and their mistrust can lead to low morale, skepticism, and turnover.
- Promote cooperation and teamwork among employees to increase productivity.
- Listen to the concerns of trusted advisors and stakeholders.

There can be a fine line between “productive narcissism” and sociopathic behavior. A dark side to EI, and a dark side to charisma. The characters in “Billions” display an intriguing mix of traits we may recognize in ourselves, our colleagues, or our leaders. We would be wise to pay attention to what lies beneath the surface.