

# Are You High IQ?

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*"Where you've got people, you've got problems."*

My first boss used to say that. At the time, it sounded cynical. The longer I've worked with leaders, however, the more I realise there is wisdom in it.

From our vantage point in executive search, we see a remarkable range of leadership styles. Some leaders inspire confidence the moment they walk into a room. Others impress through intellect alone. A few possess that rare combination of intelligence, emotional awareness and judgement that makes leadership look effortless.

It was one particular leader, however, who inspired our Modern Leaders project earlier this year.

Not because they were exceptionally intelligent. Because they were.

The project emerged because of what was missing.

## The Intelligence-Empathy Gap

There is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly visible in leadership: the gap between intellectual intelligence and emotional intelligence.

Some refer to it as the Intelligence-Empathy Gap. Let's be clear about what that means.

This is not narcissism. Narcissism is largely concerned with self-focus, status, superiority and the protection of ego. The issue here is different. We are talking about leaders who genuinely have good intentions but struggle to understand, interpret or respond to emotions, both in themselves and in others.

Nor are we talking about leaders who deliberately choose a hard-edged leadership style. Most of us have encountered those too.

The leaders I am describing are often entirely unaware of the impact they are having. Their intentions are rarely malicious. Their blind spots are simply invisible to them.

And sometimes, leadership genuinely requires difficult decisions. Not every action will make people happy. In moments of crisis, leaders often have to act decisively based on the reality in front of them.

The challenge is not decisiveness. The challenge is what happens when intellectual strength consistently outpaces emotional awareness.

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## Smart About Systems, Less Comfortable With People

A high-IQ, low-EQ leader is often easy to spot. We'll all know some.

They are analytical, logical and intellectually formidable. They grasp complex issues quickly. They see patterns where others see noise. They excel at strategy, technical challenges and problem solving.

Yet the human dimension of leadership often proves more difficult.

They may dismiss small talk as pointless. They can appear detached, abrupt or aloof. They prioritise facts over feelings and assume others do the same. They frequently underestimate the role emotions play in decision-making, motivation and organisational culture. They can leave you reeling.

To them, the answer may seem obvious. To everybody else, the way it was delivered is the problem.

A leader can understand a complex policy framework, a legal argument or a business model in extraordinary detail...yet fail to recognise why a team member feels excluded, anxious or demoralised.

That's the paradox.

## The Hidden Cost of Low EQ

The consequences are often underestimated.

Poor emotional intelligence does not merely create awkward conversations. It can become a serious organisational risk.

It can contribute to costly employee relations issues. It can undermine trust. It can discourage challenge and innovation. It can create cultures where talented people quietly disengage rather than contribute.

Organisations rarely fail because they lack intelligence. More often, they struggle because they fail to manage relationships, communication, trust and culture.

The principal finding from our Modern Leaders review was simple: in an increasingly technological world, humanity is becoming more important, not less. Empathy, connection and emotional awareness are no longer "soft skills". They are strategic capabilities.

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## Why IQ Still Matters

None of this is an argument against intelligence. Far from it.

High IQ remains enormously valuable in leadership. Strong cognitive ability supports logical reasoning, pattern recognition, judgement and the ability to navigate complexity. It helps leaders absorb information rapidly and make sense of difficult problems.

We often place people in leadership positions because they are exceptionally good at solving problems.

The difficulty comes when leaders assume that people can be managed in the same way.

People are not problems to solve. They are relationships to build.

## The Recruitment Problem Nobody Talks About

In executive search, these traits often reveal themselves in interesting ways.

High-IQ, low-EQ leaders can set unrealistically technical expectations for appointments because they discount the human realities of the market. They may reject candidates who do not reflect their own worldview or professional style.

They may underestimate the value of informal stakeholder engagement, believing such conversations to generate little useful information. In reality, those discussions often reveal some of the most important insights about organisational culture and leadership requirements.

Conversely, their lack of belief in the value of these sessions means the potential risks of holding them are also overlooked, and the recruitment is derailed when views do not align at the end.

Candidate motivation can also present difficulties. While recruiters may focus on psychology, aspiration and personal drivers, a low-EQ leader often responds to those factors with purely factual analysis.

The result can be a total disconnect between what candidates need and what organisations communicate. This can be one of the biggest risks to filling roles in the current market, causing candidates to retreat to the security of their existing role.

Perhaps most significantly, these leaders may unintentionally recruit in their own image.

Even when they strongly support diversity, they can gravitate towards candidates whose thinking style mirrors their own. Intellectual diversity often receives less attention than demographic diversity, despite being equally important in organisational performance.

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## Why This Matters Now

These challenges are becoming more visible because the workplace is changing.

Today's workforce has different expectations from previous generations. Employees increasingly expect authenticity, transparency and meaningful engagement from leaders. They want to be heard, not managed.

At the same time, organisations have become more complex. Authority is more dispersed. Collaboration is more important. Leaders are increasingly required to influence rather than instruct.

In this environment, being the smartest person in the room is no longer enough. The leaders succeeding today are those who combine intellectual capability with emotional awareness.

They can analyse data and read a room. They can solve problems and build trust. They can challenge performance while preserving relationships. They understand that leadership is not simply about being right.

It is about bringing people with you.

## The Leadership Advantage of the Future

One of the most interesting questions is whether this balance will shift naturally over time?

Historically, many professions have prioritised academic achievement, analytical ability and technical expertise above almost everything else. It is therefore unsurprising that leadership pipelines in sectors such as academia, professional services, the legal profession, research and parts of the public sector have often produced highly intelligent leaders whose emotional intelligence has received less attention.

Yet younger generations appear less persuaded by status and hierarchy. They expect leaders to be human, accessible and emotionally self-aware.

There would be a certain irony if Generation Z, the first generation to grow up entirely in a digital world, became the generation that finally restored emotional intelligence to its rightful place in leadership.

Because if the leadership challenge of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was learning how to manage complexity, the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> may be learning how to remain connected.

We still value IQ. We always will. But the future, in my view, belongs to leaders who understand that intelligence alone is not enough.

Instead, the most effective leaders are not those who can simply think better than everyone else. They are those who can understand people well enough to help everyone think better together.