JOURNAL OF LIBRARY ADMINISTRATION
2020, VOL. 60, NO. 7, 752–761
https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1786982



# Creating an Emotional Intelligence Community of Practice: A Case Study for Academic Libraries

Christina H. Gola[a] and Lisa Martin[b]

[a]Director of Human Resources and Organizational Development, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX, USA; [b]Coordinator of Outreach, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX, USA

**ABSTRACT**

Using Etienne Wenger's concept of a community of practice, UH Libraries' Liaison Services Department developed departmental members' emotional intelligence. The social learning structure of the community of practice mirrors the emotional intelligence learning model theorized by Daniel Goleman. This case study demonstrates how this approach can benefit a unit within an academic library. Using a community of practice approach to build a space for social learning creates an environment in which library workers are able to learn and practice the skills of emotional intelligence among their colleagues and within the context of the norms and values of the work environment.

**KEYWORDS**

Emotional intelligence; community of practice; academic libraries; team effectiveness

## Introduction

Emotional intelligence is a valuable set of leadership skills that involves self-awareness, managing one's emotions, managing the emotion of others, and managing relationships. The concept has long been discussed as an important set of traits for senior leaders in academic libraries. But as academic libraries diversify services and teamwork, emotional intelligence is a set of skills that can benefit professionals at all levels of an organization and have a positive impact on team and organizational effectiveness. Very little research has been conducted on effective means of building emotional intelligence within academic libraries. Daniel Goleman, the author most closely associated with defining the concept of emotional intelligence, and many other researchers suggest that building emotional intelligence requires behavioral change through practice, feedback, reflection, and a willingness to learn.

This article proposes that a potential effective learning approach can be found within the concept of a community of practice, defined as a group of individuals brought together by a shared passion to learn and reflect with one another. In theory, the concept of a community of practice aligns well with the learning strategies suggested by Goleman, and provides an accessible and economical approach for groups or teams to engage in developing emotional intelligence skills in the academic library workplace.

**CONTACT** Christina H. Gola chgola@uh.edu Director of Human Resources and Organizational Development, University of Houston Libraries, 4333 University Dr., Houston, TX 77204, USA.

## Literature review

### Emotional intelligence

The rise of emotional intelligence as a defined concept began with Daniel Goleman's (1995) book, *Emotional Intelligence*. It has since been expanded upon by a number of theorists in business and psychology and is often associated with leadership effectiveness. Later Goleman, in collaboration with Boyatzis and McKee, revised the definition of emotional intelligence as four domains: self awareness, self management, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Of importance to teamwork and organizational effectiveness is Goleman's (1998) book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, in which he argues that companies need to operate in emotional intelligent ways in order to remain dynamic and that this responsibility lies within employees at all levels of the organization. It is within this book that he offers a new learning model for emotional intelligence that involves behavioral change. While Goleman's work has implications for teamwork, it mainly focuses on individuals and overall organizational effectiveness.

Furthering the case for emotional intelligence within teams, Druskat and Wolff (2001) laid out a case for emotional intelligence at three levels of coworker interaction (individual team member, whole team, and outside entities), and proposed a model of creating norms that enable awareness, practice, and feedback for developing emotional intelligence, and in turn, team effectiveness.

Emotional intelligence related research within the academic library professional literature has mainly focused on its importance to senior leadership. Hernon and Rossiter's (2006) study of leaders from Association of Research Libraries' institutions identified important emotional intelligence traits among its membership, and later Hernon et al. (2008), released a comprehensive overview of emotional intelligence as a leadership practice applicable to academic library leaders. Kreitz ( 2009, p. 548) examined this idea further and found that senior management teams within university libraries benefit from having collective emotional intelligence traits and that as a team they can work together to "create an emotionally intelligent organization."

While the research related to senior leadership teams laid a beneficial foundation for further exploring emotional intelligence as it relates to teams, library scholars and practitioners have not fully realized this potential. Similarly, the library literature also lacks insight into effective strategies for building emotional intelligence competencies in the workplace. With the vast amount of teamwork and cross-departmental work that exists in academic libraries today, the need to consider emotional intelligence as an opportunity for improving team effectiveness seems to be an area for exploration.

### Communities of practice

Etienne Wenger (1998) developed the concept of a community of practice, and introduced it as a component of social learning theory. He defines a community of practice as "a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and

the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27). In the context of emotional intelligence in libraries, a shared domain would be a shared interest in developing emotional intelligence competencies, a community would be a set of peers or members of a team or unit in the library, and a practice would be the knowledge and skills that develop from community members' discussions and reflections of emotional intelligence as it occurs in the workplace.

Communities of practice have proved useful and increasingly common in academic libraries. Most case studies are concentrated in the development of specific skills or knowledge around a practical job function such as reskilling for new technologies (Goodwin & Gola, 2008), mentoring toward promotion and tenure (Henrich & Attebury, 2010), or developing teaching skills (Osborn, 2017). Together these cases share a common theme in that they enable learning to occur informally, among self-directed peers, and in direct relation to a workplace project, role, or expectation.

### *The intersection of emotional intelligence and communities of practice*

The emotional intelligence framework is made up of personal and social competencies; the personal competencies determine how people manage themselves, and the social competencies determine how people manage relationships and themselves in social contexts. Daniel Goleman (1998, p. 243) asserts that emotional competencies cannot simply be acquired with one-off training programs and that understanding is not enough. He states that "deep change requires the retooling of ingrained habits of thought, feeling, and behavior," coming not from intellectual learning, but rather behavioral change. Goleman (1998) suggests that for this type of change to occur, learning must address individual needs and be self-motivated, come with careful feedback and a network of support, and involve practice, reflection, and positive reinforcement.

Communities of practice are framed within the context of social learning theory, the theory that new behaviors can be acquired by observing and modeling others. In his development of the concept of communities of practice, Wenger argues that learning does not rest with the individual but rather is a social process that is situated in a cultural context (Farnsworth et al., 2016). In the workplace, the cultural context is how behaviors are learned, reinforced, and valued by coworkers.

The concepts of emotional intelligence and communities of practice can be aligned based on the social nature of emotional intelligence and the ability of a community of practice to allow learning to be inherently social. The authors theorize that a workplace community of practice is an ideal approach to building emotional intelligence because it provides the necessary social process in which self-motivated individuals are able to practice, receive feedback, reflect, and reinforce emotional intelligence competencies within the cultural context of the workplace. Opportunities to observe and model emotional intelligence competencies are embedded in the everyday interactions of coworkers and a community of practice becomes the embedded support structure leading to an ongoing cycle of reinforcing and valuing of emotional intelligence.

## Methods: An emotional intelligence community of practice case study

### *Developing the community of practice*

Developing a community of practice around emotional intelligence or another topic is most successful when there is a series of predetermined roles which work to develop the community. The recommended roles are a champion, a project manager or coordinator, facilitators, and of course the community (Wenger et al., 2002). While not every unit or library is large enough that these roles are appropriate, it is important to note the reasoning behind the various roles and to emulate as best as possible that logic in order to organically develop and sustain a community of practice.

A champion is a person in a position of formal leadership who helps convince the potential community members of the need for the endeavor (Wenger et al., 2002). One way to do so is to advocate for emotional intelligence to become part of the organization or unit's values or priorities. Using a value as the topic of a community of practice is especially helpful in cases where the organization recognizes the value but also recognizes that staff lack skills related to the value. Once the gap has been identified, a person in a formal position of leadership can suggest or agree that a community of practice is a way to address the gap. This person functions as the community's champion.

The project manager or coordinator "is a community member who helps the community focus on its domain, maintain relationships, and develop its practice" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 80). This person is typically respected in the organization, socially engaged with others, and interested in informal leadership opportunities. The community functions best when the coordinator is not the champion. This is the person who sets the schedule, finds facilitators, and supports the overall community.

The facilitator is a community member who picks the readings, prepares discussion questions, and facilitates the discussion for a given session. The facilitator, and indeed the community, can vary from discussion to discussion. A core set of members attend regularly, other members tend to participate only in discussions of interest, and some would-be members never participate at all. It is important to leave the community as an open and voluntary activity (Wenger et al., 2002).

In order to help a community of practice to develop, ensure that no one is required to participate, but at the same time include formal leaders in the community. The participation of supervisors and administrators signals the importance of the developing community. Although not everyone will attend, the learning that occurs in the community will naturally filter out and even those who do not attend will reap the benefits through interactions with colleagues.

Integration of new members into the community is a key method to sustaining it. Attrition happens as members change roles, change organizations, or lack the time to commit to the community. Adding new members is necessary in order to keep the community serving its purpose of sharing knowledge and building skills. New members who join the organization should be informed of the community, encouraged to join, and then allowed to decide whether or not to participate. Overall, the key to creating a community of practice is structure, and the key to sustaining it is flexibility.

**Table 1.** Community of practice roles at UH Libraries.

| Champions | Department heads |
|---|---|
| Coordinator | Librarian who began the community |
| Facilitator | Rotated; interested community members |

### *In practice at the University of Houston*

The University of Houston (UH) is a large and diverse public research university. The UH Libraries employ about fifty librarians and seventy staff members to support the goals and initiatives of the university. The Liaison Services department at UH Libraries is a relatively large department consisting of about twenty librarians, both subject librarians and functional specialists, who provide expertise and services across campus.

At the time of the creation of the emotional intelligence community of practice in 2015, the department had a written value that articulated the importance of emotional intelligence as a tool for increasing collaboration, leadership capacity, and team effectiveness. The department also had norms for all departmental meetings, which provided a framework for department members to debate and agree upon meeting behaviors. With support from department leadership, the community of practice developed through organic and voluntary participation. It quickly became an integral component of the departmental learning culture.

UH Libraries' Liaison Services Department used a Coursera course, "Inspiring Leadership through Emotional Intelligence," taught by Richard Boyatzis, as the anchor to begin the emotional intelligence community of practice. The discussions during the eight-week course inspired the idea to formalize a community of practice as a departmental initiative. The idea began through a conversation between a department head (later a community of practice champion) and the librarian enrolled in the course (later the community of practice coordinator) (Table 1).

The coordinator role was established when the librarian who enrolled in the Coursera course encouraged other department colleagues to enroll and then picked out the initial readings for discussion. The department heads encouraged the ensuing discussions, and became champions of the community as well as members in it.

A discussion format was chosen, and developed into standing weekly discussion sessions. These sessions focused on a particular reading, talk, or event and the emotional intelligence concepts in each. Community members were invited to read or watch the readings ahead of the discussion sessions. The resources were made available to everyone in the department as a continually-updated list using a shared Google Doc.

The role of facilitator rotated on a voluntary basis. Community members were often facilitators one week and community members the next, which allowed for members to engage in the material at different depths depending on interest and experience.

Because of the shared commitment to emotional intelligence as a value within the department, participation, while voluntary, was relatively widespread and consistent. Those who attended were self-motivated by their own development of emotional intelligence.

The champions and the coordinator of the community of practice would regularly encourage and announce upcoming discussion readings and topics in departmental meetings and via email. After exhausting the relevant readings that originated from the

Coursera, facilitators began actively finding and sharing relevant readings from a variety of subject areas, namely librarianship, business, and leadership.

Many of the new readings did not specifically address emotional intelligence, but were instead about topics that benefit from emotional intelligence such as change management and diversity and inclusion. The discussions often centered on how emotional intelligence relates to, or factors into, these emotional intelligence-related topics. During discussions, community members were often able to reflect on their own emotional intelligence, or that observed by leaders around them, in the context of current projects or experiences related to these topics.

## Results

After several months in action, the community of practice was highly successful and an integral part of the department culture. Once established, the weekly discussion groups were well attended. The greatest barrier to participation was not buy-in or self-motivation, but rather individual schedules preventing attendance. Those not in attendance, however, would often hear about the discussions and be motivated to reflect on the readings individually. After multiple years of the community's existence, a large list of resources is, and remains, readily available to refer back to and reflect on.

One of the strengths of the community of practice that UH Libraries developed is that the role of facilitator rotated on a voluntary basis so that everyone had the opportunity to contribute their perspective and their knowledge. The role also functioned as a way to build facilitation skills and enjoy a simple leadership opportunity in a smaller setting. The facilitator role became a self-motivator for individuals to discover and share new readings, videos, or scenarios for the overall learning and benefit of the community.

A notable outcome of the rotating facilitation was the variation of emotional intelligence-related topics that were introduced. The diversity and inclusion-related focus became a pivotal turning point in expanding the complexities and depth of EI self-awareness. This came about when one of the department members, strongly interested and focused on EDI issues, volunteered to lead one of the discussions. Upon searching for relevant readings, she found an article that explored emotional intelligence from a diversity lens. This led to multiple follow-up readings and discussions about self-awareness of one's privilege, micro-aggressions, and unconscious biases.

Supervisors were also key factors and role models in the community. Supervisors chose to participate as peer learners and felt confident disclosing their vulnerabilities and emotional intelligence learning processes, which contributed to increased organizational trust from all members of the community. For example, several readings focused on feedback as a key method of raising self-awareness and increasing self-management. Supervisors expressed the importance of not only providing feedback to employees, but also to supervisors, from all levels. By opening the door to regular 360-based feedback, all members of the department showed a greater appreciation for, and openness to, giving and receiving feedback, furthering the development of emotional intelligence competencies.

By the second year of the community's existence, there was an observable increase in the openness in which emotional intelligence was discussed across the department in various meetings and interactions. Individuals spoke openly about reflecting on their own emotional intelligence, and confidence levels and emotional intelligence skills grew. An informal electronic survey of department members (Appendix) found that those who regularly attended the community of practice discussion sessions increased their confidence in the areas of emotional intelligence. One comment noted, "The discussions improve my emotional intelligence, but also make me more aware of where I need to work on it."

Overall, the authors can confidently assert that there was perceived collective and individual behavioral change (as Goleman asserts is key to building emotional intelligence) among members of the department in their own self-awareness and ability to assess and handle others. There was also an observable increase in morale, relationship building, and overall appreciation for individual strengths and contributions to the work of the department. A comment from the survey stated, "Even just having the discussions gave me a platform for developing stronger relationships with my colleagues. So beyond just having more tools in my arsenal to consider how to work with people, working through the thoughts has been a valuable team building exercise."

As confidence grew, emotional intelligence became an important part of the hiring process. This included actions such as emotional intelligence-based interview questions and evaluating prospective hires based on their self-awareness. As new members of the department were onboarded, the opportunity to engage in the community was shared and discussed through supervisor meetings, mentors, and peers. The new members were also provided access to the reading list in the shared Google Doc. The acceptance and buy-in of the community of practice by these new members varied. For example, one new member was very motivated by the first experience and later became the coordinator when the original coordinator stepped down, whereas another member did not have a good initial experience and chose not to participate at all.

At various points in the life of the community, new department members chose not to participate and long-standing department members dropped off due to workload. Developing a clear rationale for new members to participate, rather than simply assuming that they would understand the benefits of the community, became essential. Also essential were engaging new members in dialogue about their understanding of emotional intelligence and re-developing norms for behavior in the community. At the same time, community members held individual conversations with long-standing department members who had stopped attending. All of this work required the champions and coordinators (all of whom were different people than those who had been in the roles at the beginning) to pay more attention to the community. While they were not always successful with every effort, the recognition of the effort is an important takeaway nonetheless, and it has helped maintain long-term success of the community.

## Discussion: Best practices for implementation

One key factor in creating a community of practice is the motivated involvement of a champion (or champions) to shepherd the community through any challenges and to

signal its value to potential attendees. The champion should have both positional power and the respect of others within the organization.

Although the UH Libraries community of practice initially focused tightly on emotional intelligence and leadership skills, weaving in equity, diversity, and inclusion skills quickly became valuable to the entire community. Whether the goal is to explore equity, diversity, and inclusion or other key skills in addition to (or even in place of) emotional intelligence, the community of practice framework is endlessly flexible.

If an organization already identifies as a learning culture, developing a community of practice is simply a matter of extending that culture into practice. A community of practice focuses on social learning and does require willingness to engage and develop on the part of its practitioners. A strong level of existing emotional intelligence is not necessary as the intent is that the group will learn together. If an organization does not identify as a learning culture, it is possible to use a community of practice to develop that culture.

A library seeking to create an intentional community of practice could also use a course (many of which are freely available online) as a way of testing out the practice. A course works particularly well due to its natural end point; if the community does not desire to continue, then it is natural to disperse once the course is finished. Other options include selecting readings from a particular book in the area of focus or watching a series of videos on a topic or theme. Even a short-term learning community can lead to benefits such as an increase in staff knowledge and skills and stronger morale.

The community of practice ideally should be open to all library workers, with staff encouraged to participate and provided the time to do so. Lunch discussions are exclusionary when staff are paid hourly and would need to participate in their free time, for example. Although the community of practice in this situation focused on librarians because of the department in which it took place, other communities of practice at UH Libraries have successfully incorporated library staff as well as librarians. Champions, particularly those in leadership roles, can play a key role in encouraging all library workers to participate.

## Conclusion

Using Wenger's concept of a community of practice, UH Libraries' Liaison Services Department created a structure for advancing department members' emotional intelligence competencies. The social learning structure of the community of practice mirrors the emotional intelligence learning model needed for behavioral change, advocated by Goleman. The skills that comprise the emotional intelligence framework are skills that not only increase an individual's leadership capacity but also increase team cohesion, productivity, and resilience in libraries. Using a community of practice approach to build a space for social learning creates an environment in which library workers are able to learn and practice the skills of emotional intelligence positively and directly within the context of their work projects and interactions. The growth in emotional intelligence benefits the library as a whole, as well as the members of the community. And in this case, it furthered other values of the organization and fostered respect for individual differences by incorporating equity, diversity, and inclusion values into

discussions. Development of an emotional intelligence-focused community of practice within the library is a positive step that leads to the growth of individuals and the betterment of the library organization.

## References

Coursera Inc. (n.d). *Inspiring leadership through emotional intelligence*. https://www.coursera.org/learn/emotional-intelligence-leadership

Druskat, V. U., & Wolff, S. B. (2001). Building the emotional intelligence of groups. *Harvard Business Review*, *79*(3), 80–90.

Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., & Wenger-Trayner, E. (2016). Communities of practice as a social theory of learning: A conversation with Etienne Wenger. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *64*(2), 139–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2015.1133799

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Learning to lead with emotional intelligence* (1st ed.). Harvard Business Review Press.

Goodwin, S., & Gola, C. H. (2008). Preparing staff for federated searching: A community of practice approach. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, *13*(2–3), 245–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/10875300802103908

Henrich, K. J., & Attebury, R. I. (2010). Communities of practice at an academic library: A new approach to mentoring at the University of Idaho. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *36*(2), 158–165. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2010.01.007

Hernon, P., Giesecke, J., & Alire, C. A. (2008). *Academic librarians as emotionally intelligent leaders*. Libraries Unlimited.

Hernon, P., & Rossiter, N. (2006). Emotional intelligence: Which traits are most prized? *College & Research Libraries*, *67*(3), 260–275. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.67.3.260

Kreitz, P. (2009). Leadership and emotional intelligence: A study of university library directors and their senior management teams. *College & Research Libraries*, *70*(6), 531–554. https://doi.org/10.5860/0700531

Osborn, J. (2017). Librarians as teachers: Forming a learning and teaching community of practice. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, *66*(2), 162–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2017.1328633

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

## Appendix: Survey instrument

EI Assessment

1. Did you participate in any EI & Leadership discussions (April 2016 to present)?

Yes

Once or twice

No

Skip To Question 7 if, did not participate in any EI & Leadership discussions *(April 2016 to present).*

2. How competent did you feel in the areas of emotional intelligence (awareness of self, awareness of others, management of self, management of others) before the EI & Leadership discussion group started in April 2016?

*Responses captured using 1–5 graphic sliding scale, 1 being feeling highly competent, 5 being feeling least competent.*

3. How competent do you feel in the areas of emotional intelligence now?
*Responses captured using 1–5 graphic sliding scale, 1 being feeling highly competent, 5 being feeling least competent.*
4. Do you feel that the EI discussion group had an impact on your competence in these areas?
Definitely yes
Probably yes
Might or might not
Probably not
Definitely not
5. Do you feel that attendance at EI discussions has had a positive impact on your ability to participate in groups, teams, and the department?
Definitely yes
Probably yes
Might or might not
Probably not
Definitely not
6. Do you feel that attendance at EI discussions has had a positive impact on your ability to perform your daily tasks at work?
Definitely yes
Probably yes
Might or might not
Probably not
Definitely not
7. Do you want to tell us anything about the discussion group, EI, or anything else?
*Free response*