Leadership and Emotional Intelligence: A Phenomenological Study on
Developmental Experiences of Effective Federal Government Leaders

By David A. Rude

B.S. in Business Administration, January 1995, George Mason University
M.P.A. in Public Administration, December 2003, American University

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Michael Marquardt
Professor of Human and Organizational Learning and International Affairs

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David A. Rude

Dissertation Research Committee

Michael Marquardt, Professor of Human and Organizational Learning and International Affairs, Dissertation Director

Gary Low, Professor Emeritus of Education, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Committee Member

Brad Shuck, Assistant Professor of Workforce and Human Resource Education, University of Louisville, Committee Member

Dedication

In memory of my grandparents,
Egbert and Virginia Rude, who instilled in me the
value of education; and in honor of my Mom,
Mary Rude, who has steadfastly loved me and
supported all of my life's pursuits.

Abstract

Leadership and Emotional Intelligence: A Phenomenological Study on
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This dissertation examines the experiences of effective Federal Government

leaders in developing their emotional intelligence (EI). Using a conceptual framework of

adult learning, leadership, and leader development, this study focused on experiential and

situated learning to discern how EI develops. The researcher in the context of this

transcendental phenomenological study used social constructivism and interpretivism as

theoretical lenses. The research involved administering a validated EI instrument to

Federal government executives and then interviewing 11 of those executives to

understand their meaningful EI developmental experiences.

The findings generated six themes that were reconfigured using pattern analysis

into the following conclusions: (a) a diverse array of factors affects EI developmental

experiences; (b) EI developmental experiences are social and cultural in nature; and (c)

effective EI development is experientially based. A fourth conclusion transcended those

other three patterns – EI experiences are inherent for effective leadership.

The research conclusions intimate important contributions to theory, namely:

understanding how EI is developed within leaders; insights into the reality of effective

Federal government leaders, to include building EI; attending to culture as a phenomenon

impacting EI and leadership development; the evolving relationship between EI, adult

learning, and leadership; and the vitality of qualitative research. In addition, this study

suggested the following recommendations for practitioners: (a) integrate EI into leader

development; (b) develop leaders using a scholar-practitioner orientation; (c) foster a

culture that promotes learning about EI; and (d) capture and share the EI-related experiences. A holistic curriculum for developing EI within leaders is proposed.

Lastly, this study suggested opportunities for robust future research. Greater research focus on the Federal government is needed. Culture must be explored in the context of EI. Also, EI research is needed at the organizational level of analysis. And in a more generic sense, this study encourages continued research on EI and its impact, to include researching the effectiveness of the proposed developmental framework.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, leader development, leadership, experiential learning, situated learning

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Leaders must first know and be able to manage their own emotions and second be able

to understand the emotions of their followers and the context in which those emotions

occur."

Shuck & Herd, 2012, p. 168

"For outstanding leadership, [emotional intelligence] counts for just about everything ...

leadership is all about emotional intelligence"

Goleman, 1998, pp. 13, 187

Overview

The world's largest organizations reside in the U.S. government (Kelman, 2007).

With over 2 million employees (Office of Personnel Management,

http://www.opm.gov/feddata/HistoricalTables/ExecutiveBranchSince1940.asp), the

Federal government is vast. Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler (2010) noted that public sector

(e.g., Federal government) leaders need to understand the emotions and their meaning as

assigned by stakeholders (e.g., citizenry), use emotions in rational-based decision

making, and be attuned to emotional expressions during public activities. Since the

Federal government especially is accountable to taxpayers, it is critical that

methodologies for ascertaining return on investment (or value) be articulated in terms of

developing current and future leaders.

Bryson and Kelley (1978) provided a political perspective of public sector

workforce leadership. Within public organizations: (a) individual variables are focused

on constituency interests; (b) structural considerations are focused on coalition building;

and (c) environmental needs are concentrated on interest group activity. Development to

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build EI competence does not receive substantive attention within the public sector (Bryson & Kelley, 1978; Turner, 2007). Perhaps not surprisingly, the largest proficiency gaps for leadership competencies are those that relate to emotional intelligence (EI), i.e., interpersonal skills and conflict management (Goleman, 2011). These competency gaps are contrary to the positive perception that EI has been accorded within Federal government research. For example, in the United States Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) study, *Managing for Engagement – Communication, Connection, and Courage* (McPhie, 2009), EI-related attributes were essential for promoting a healthy and constructive atmosphere.

"Emotional intelligence (EI) skills are vital to human performance and healthy, productive organizations" (Nelson & Low, 2011, p. 17). EI consists of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Phipps & Prieto, 2011). These skills are foundations for contemporary leadership perspectives, such as transformational (Bass, 1985) and authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) leadership styles. Since EI's origins in 1990 (Salovey & Mayer), its link with effective leadership has been reinforced (Goleman, 1995; Yukl, 2010). Goleman (1995) cited "knowing one's emotions … recognizing a feeling *as it happens* – is the keystone of EI" (p. 43). Goleman (1998) noted that 67 percent of performance-related abilities were emotional in nature. Emotionally unintelligent people may become enslaved to emotions and unable to lead fulfilled lives (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). To set the present study's stage, the narrative that follows describes the relationship between leadership and EI, and how EI is learned.

Leadership and EI. Effective leadership is people-centric; for instance, understanding different perspectives is crucial for leadership that is emotionally

intelligent (Nelson & Low, 2011). "Leadership addresses emotional as well as conceptual work" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 116). "Emotional intelligence can help leaders solve complex problems, make better decisions, plan how to use their time effectively, adapt their behavior to the situation, and manage crises" (Yukl, 2010, p. 213). To amplify this assertion, Goleman (1998) offered: "[t]he leader is also a key *source* of the organization's emotional tone" (p. 185). EI encompasses social interactions inherent in leadership responsibilities (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Bar-On, 1997, 2000; Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008; Nelson & Low, 2011; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). In this regard, managing interpersonal skills and collective enterprises bridge leadership and EI (Yukl, 2010). Conversely, rigidity and poor relationships drive leadership failure (Goleman, 1998). For these reasons, leadership and EI – while separate constructs – are inherently related with each other.

Learning EI. "It is becoming increasingly important for leaders to understand the emotions and emotionality within organizations that they lead" (James & Arroba, 2005, p. 299). However, reflecting on emotional experiences is where the most resistance to further learning about emotions and emotionality occurs (James & Arroba, 2005). Emotions can inhibit participant learning, due to the very emotional triggers that the learning may reveal (Bierema, 2008). EI-related skills are, according to Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003), a higher order of learning. "Helping learners understand and make sense of these emotion-laden experiences … represents one of the most important and most challenging tasks for adult educators" (Dirkx, 2008, p. 9).

Early empirical research on the impact of EI on leadership showed mixed results (Carmeli, 2003; Caruso, Salovey, & Mayer, 2003; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Goleman

(1995, 1998) assigned EI as the most important aspect of leadership. Weinberger (2009) and Muyia and Kacirek (2009) deduced alternate findings when they explored the relationship between EI, leaders and leadership effectiveness. Weinberger (2009) noted that "benefits of emotional intelligence … still need to be empirically confirmed" (p. 767). Similarly, Northouse (2007) opined that "the intricacies of how [EI] relates to leadership" (and, by extension, leader development) needs to be better understood (p. 24).

Other established EI models have reported adequate measures of validity and reliability (see also, Bar-On, 1997; Nelson & Low, 2011). As reported by Hammett, Hollon, and Maggard (2012), the Nelson and Low Emotional Skills Assessment Process model was validated to be significantly related to leadership performance quality. Therefore, although some studies (particularly Muyia & Kacirek, 2009 and Weinberger, 2009) have urged continued empirical research, the literature searched and described above resoundingly accords EI as a construct that is well-grounded enough to pursue.

Leader development and EI. With the stage having been set for associating leadership with EI, attention now turns to EI and leader development. Development is vital, since "We cannot assume the existence of effective people skills" (Berman & West, 2008, p 753). Improving EI is a key factor in career excellence (Nelson & Low, 2011). As Goleman (1998) put it, "the good news about emotional intelligence is that *it can improve throughout life*" (p. 240). Furthermore, EI as a learned ability (Nelson & Low, 2011; Low & Hammett, 2012) is tantamount with maturity (Goleman, 1998; Sen, 2010). Integral to maturity is continual development and learning that entails "a positive and strength-oriented approach [to encourage] a person to see changes" (Nelson & Low, 2011, p. xxvii). Desirable EI skills were found to be positively associated with leadership

performance, whereas unhealthy EI skills were found to be negatively associated with leadership performance (Hammett, Hollon, & Maggard, 2012). Berman and West (2008) hypothesized that a leader navigating situations involving negative emotions, using creative problem solving using emotional content, and stimulating significant change in developmental interventions should have positive outcomes in a government setting.

Statement of the Problem

Perhaps paradoxically, leader development programs inherently need both mission and people foci, i.e., "opposing solutions [which are] needed and interwoven" (Luscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 229). With the established need for both mission and people foci for developing leaders, the use of mission oriented skill sets needs to be balanced with people oriented skill sets. The skills, skill sets, and strategies of transformative EI are central to developing healthy and productive relationships, and to successful adaptability (e.g., transition, change, resilience) in education, life, and leadership (G. R. Low, personal communication, June 27, 2012).

Competencies related to strategic planning, vision, and innovation – in other words, mission oriented skill sets – were distinct strengths among leaders at all levels (DoD, 2008, 2009). Within the public sector, leadership has traditionally been referred to as a position or mission focus (Bryson & Kelly, 1978). Although the strengths of leaders should not be discounted, the perceived dearth of EI competence as signified by DoD competency gap assessments (DoD, 2008, 2009) among leaders can lead to unwelcome consequences such as toxic leadership (Goleman, 1995, 1998, 2011). Tangibly and pragmatically, taxpayers have an appropriate reason to expect a return on investment (ROI) as regards Federal government leader development programs.

Unfortunately, however, a key problem is the Federal government's lack of people oriented skill sets that are of particular relevance to the current study. Myriad problems emanate from marginalized focus of developing leaders with EI competence. Grundmann (2010), in the MSPB study, *A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees*, found appreciable differences between supervisor's perceptions of their own EI behaviors and perceptions from their direct reports. In addition, EI-related competencies seem to account for the largest deficiencies in a leader's effectiveness. (Competencies are an evolving focus of Federal government leader development.) Specifically, conflict management and interpersonal skills are among the largest competency gaps among supervisors, managers and executives within the Department of Defense (DoD, 2008, 2009), the largest Federal government agency (Kelman, 2007).

These findings indicate a lack of EI in Federal government leaders. This is problematic, as interpersonal skills and conflict management are critical EI competencies (Goleman, 2011). Compounding this issue is the perception that Federal government leader development programs do not sufficiently attend to EI as an integral part of building a leader's well-rounded competence. Moreover, there is scarce qualitative information to explore in what ways EI and leadership development within the Federal government are integrated.

In addition, Turner (2007) stated that, for Federal government executives, "the most valuable approaches to leadership skills development are experiential and relational" (p. 53). At the same time, though, Turner (2007) emphasized that knowledge and expertise building, skill alignment with culture and the ability to use knowledge to

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