

The Data Leaders Ignore

As complexity and uncertainty rise, emotions are becoming more present at work—yet most leaders are ill-equipped to work with them.



Source:
Potential Project

Leaders need a new relationship to emotions—their own and others'. The old one was built for control, not insight.

Emotional Intelligence is not just a behavior—it's a mindset.
It shifts how leaders relate to emotions—turning them from triggers into insights.



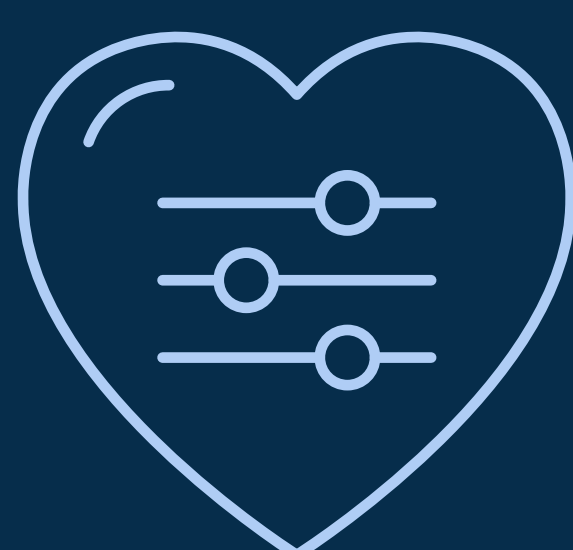
Emotional Intelligence is well understood to be:

The ability to understand and manage emotions effectively, in oneself and others.



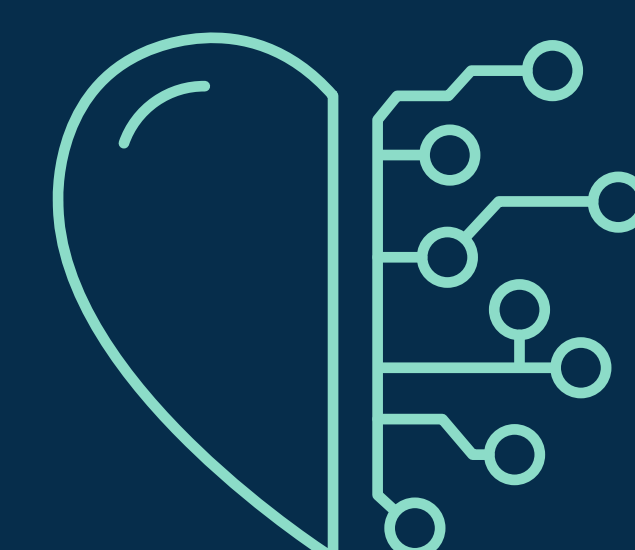
What if we viewed Emotional Intelligence as:

The capacity to relate to emotions—our own and others'—as meaningful information.



Unfortunately, this can lead to a "control" orientation:

Emotions are something I need to manage, regulate, contain or reduce.



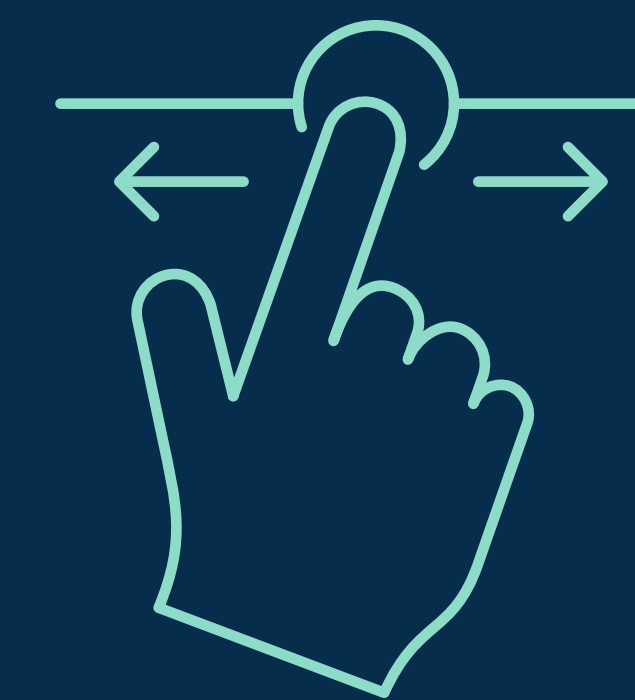
What if we changed our relationship to emotions:

Emotions are something I can relate to and learn from because they provide meaningful insights.



And a goal by leaders:

to have better, more controlled reactions.



What if we changed the goal:

to be aware of my emotions so I gather information and react more intentionally.

Emotional Intelligence is about learning rather than regulation.
We bring curiosity versus control.

According to Potential Project research:

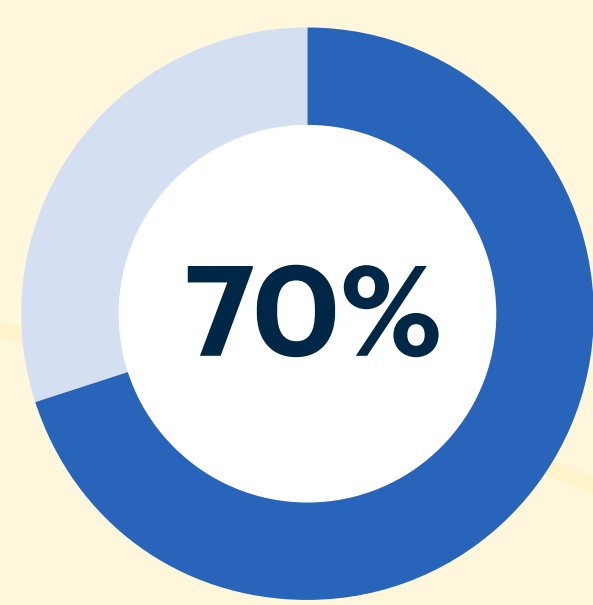
Only 12%
of leaders
rate themselves
as high on
Emotional
Intelligence.

Only 10%
of employees
rate their leaders
as high on
Emotional
Intelligence.

This presents a significant opportunity.

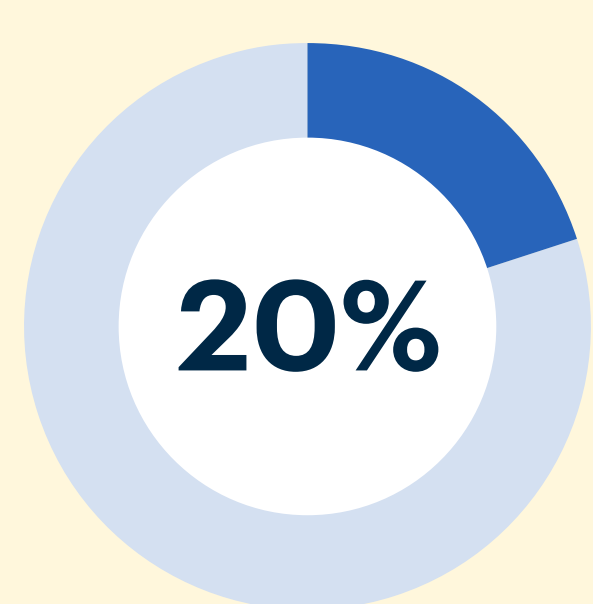
Emotional Intelligence helps leaders to perform more effectively in this moment of AI acceleration, global uncertainty, and workforce anxiety.

NAVIGATE THE DIFFICULT



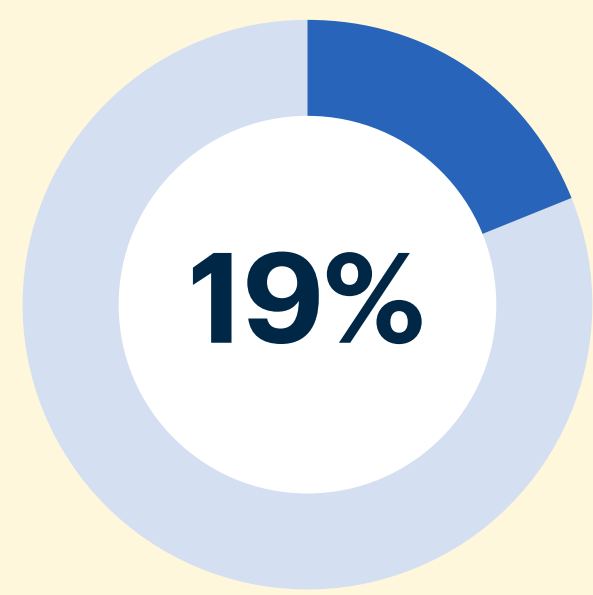
Leaders with high Emotional Intelligence are significantly more likely to engage in difficult, high-stakes conversations rather than avoiding them.¹

Employees state that leaders with high Emotional Intelligence are 70% better at having courageous conversations.¹

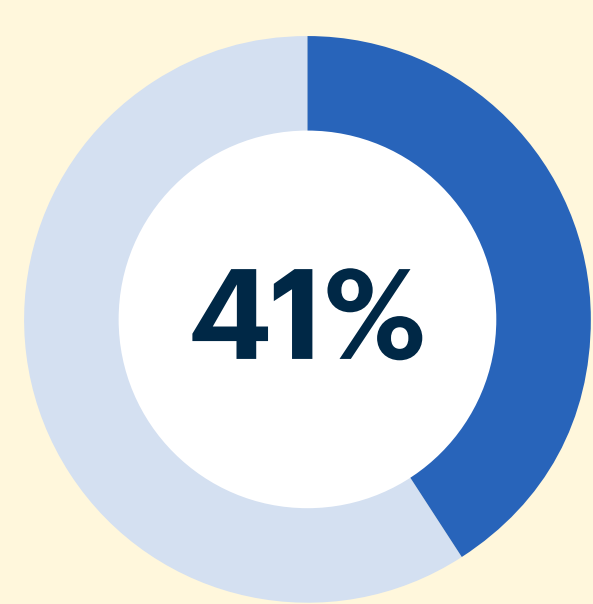


LEAD UNDER PRESSURE

Leaders who can specifically spot and name emotions are better able to regulate under pressure and maintain the clarity to lead decisively.²

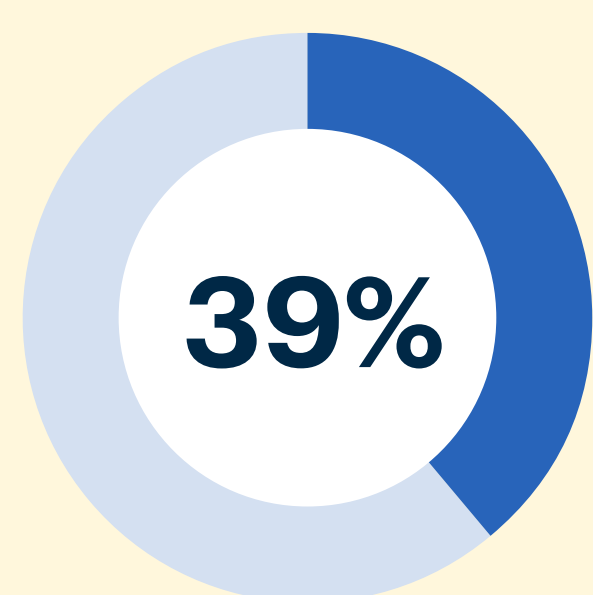


Leaders with high Emotional Intelligence report 20% greater confidence in leading others and 19% greater confidence leading into the future.¹

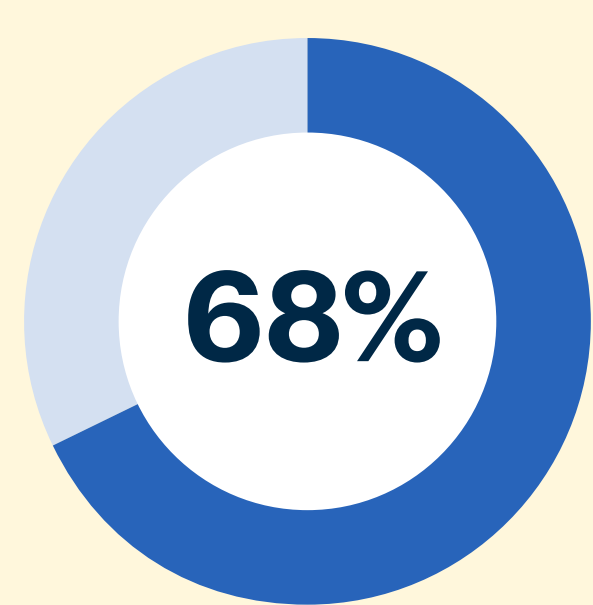


MAINTAIN EQUILIBRIUM

Emotional regulation is complex cognitive work. Suppression can actually increase stress reactions and negatively impact mental and physical health.³

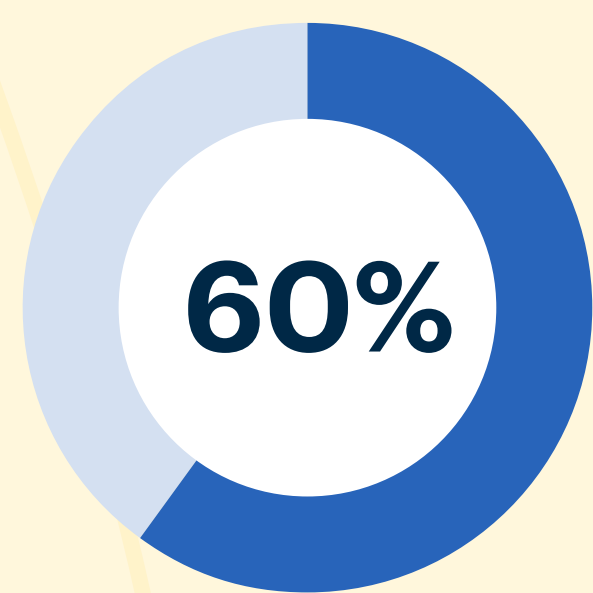


Emotional Intelligence can reduce the drain of suppression and lower the cognitive load. Employees experience 41% lower burnout working under leaders with high Emotional Intelligence. Leaders with high Emotional Intelligence experience 39% lower burnout.¹



BUILD TRUST AND CONNECTION

When leaders can stay present with versus avoid emotional moments, trust and connection builds. Both the leader and the team feel less lonely.¹



Employees experience 68% lower loneliness working under leaders with high Emotional Intelligence. Leaders with high Emotional Intelligence experience 60% lower loneliness.¹

Sources: ¹ Potential Project. Based on survey of 246 leaders across 15 industries. ² Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett and the theory of emotional granularity

³ American Psychological Association

The research showed no meaningful correlation between a leader's Emotional Intelligence and AI usage, attitudes, or adoption.

AI will neither provide or replace Emotional Intelligence in a leader.

We can all improve our relationship with emotions.
Here are three ways to start.

1

DON'T IGNORE THE SIGNAL

When experiencing a strong emotion, pause and ask: **"What is this emotion telling me?"** For example, is a value being challenged or a risk emerging?

Focus on extracting the signal rather than reacting to the feeling.

WHY THIS WORKS (NEUROSCIENCE)

This shifts processing from the amygdala (emotional reactivity) to the prefrontal cortex. It integrates the emotional and cognitive networks, allowing emotions to inform decisions rather than drive them.

2

TEST YOUR INTERPRETATION

Before acting on an emotion, make your interpretation explicit and test it with others. For example: **"I might be misreading this, but I'm sensing some hesitation. How do you see it?"** This turns emotions into shared understanding and trust.

WHY THIS WORKS (NEUROSCIENCE)

Testing interpretations reduces reliance on fast, automatic judgments, improving accuracy and reducing bias. It also activates empathy.

3

NAME THE EMOTIONS

In key moments, explicitly invite emotional data into the conversation. Ask simple questions such as: **"What are people feeling about this?"** or **"What concerns are we not naming?"** Treat emotions as valid input alongside facts.

WHY THIS WORKS (NEUROSCIENCE)

Naming emotions in a group setting reduces any collective threat responses and increases psychological safety.

Source: Potential Project