Tips to Improve Your Emotional Intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence—the ability to understand, perceive, and manage emotions—is key to effective leadership, principals and district administrators say. Researchers use varying definitions to explain emotional intelligence, but they often center on certain skills. Here are some of those traits and how school and district leaders can put them into action:

**Self-awareness**

**WHAT IT MEANS:** The ability to understand and anticipate one’s own emotions and understand how one’s actions and decisions affect others.

**TRY THIS:** Busy leaders should set regular reminders to stop and be present in the current moment, rather than thinking two steps ahead at all times. Nick Davies, an associate principal in Vancouver, Wash., stops for a mindful moment every time he hears a school bell. If he’s interacting with students or teachers, he reminds himself to be fully present in the conversation. If he’s alone in his office, he stops to reflect on his own emotions and stress levels.

**Self-management**

**WHAT IT MEANS:** The ability to control and regulate one’s own emotions, adapt to changes in the environment, and maintain a healthy outlook.

**TRY THIS:** Identify and anticipate situations that may spark your own defensiveness or other counterproductive emotions. In conversations about problems, seek to ensure that employees’ emotions are validated before you rush to offer a solution. Nicole Bottomley, the principal of King Phillip High School in Norfolk, Mass., draws on her counseling background, frequently asking teachers to “tell me more” before she asserts an opinion.

**Social skill**

**WHAT IT MEANS:** The ability to build and maintain healthy relationships.

**TRY THIS:** When working with employees, examine the gap between your intentions and their impact. Efforts at demonstrating appreciation mean little if they don’t actually address a priority or value for employees, said Suzan Harris, the principal of Henderson Middle School in Jackson, Ga. While some teachers may appreciate a shout-out in an employee newsletter, others may value a chance to leave school 10 minutes early to take their child to an appointment. Some administrators have also made it a habit to ask “How can I help?” instead of “How are you doing?” when they greet employees in the hallways.

**Empathy**

**WHAT IT MEANS:** The action of considering others’ emotions, needs, and experiences and factoring that understanding into decisionmaking.

**TRY THIS:** Identify ways to be present in classrooms and schools for reasons other than evaluating staff performance. Terrell, Texas, Superintendent Georgeanne Warnock developed a deeper sense of empathy for the teacher experience when she added herself to her district’s substitute teaching schedule during the pandemic. Picking up a shift a week, Warnock better understood the stresses her teachers faced, like upticks in student-behavior concerns and the challenges of learning recovery. She’s continued subbing since, and she shares her findings with teachers working to acknowledge and validate their experiences.

**Motivation**

**WHAT IT MEANS:** The ability to understand how to spur others to action, both collectively and as individuals.

**TRY THIS:** Identify big and small ways to give educators voice and choice in their schools and districts. Recognizing how much the timing of teacher development days and spring break affected teachers’ family lives, Rochester, Ill., Superintendent Dan Cox put a committee of teachers in charge of planning the school calendar, setting break times that made sense with their personal lives and instructional plans. He also listened when teachers pitched revisions to the districts’ parent-teacher conference schedule, spacing out the meetings rather than clustering them.

**SOURCE:** Education Week

Icons: via Getty