

# Education Week

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## Positive Resonance

By Richard E. Boyatzis

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*Britney's eyes widened, and her mouth dropped a little ... it was a moment of discovery. Amid a buzz in the room, she rushed to her project group and said, "Their tractor went 60 centimeters! Come on, let's do it." Britney told them, excitedly, how to place the rubber bands on the wooden wheels to get traction. She added, "THAT'S what he means by friction." Mr. Alston had given the class a project to explore the concept of friction in motion. They built tractors from pieces of wood, metal, and hex nuts, then they gave them power by twisting rubber bands. The groups were competing to see whose tractor could travel the farthest. Twisting the rubber bands even tighter added a few centimeters, but not much. Then the discovery occurred and spread through the classroom contagiously. Later, as Mr. Alston guided the students through a discussion of friction, Britney and many others "got it." Mr. Alston's enthusiasm and passion for science lit fires of curiosity in the students that day.*

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To an adult, the above scene may not seem like much, but to a class of 4th graders, this was an epiphany. We have seen these moments portrayed in movies about great teachers, from classics like "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" or "To Sir, With Love," to more recent films like "Dead Poets Society." That moment of discovery is what we all long for as educators. It is what we also long for as educational leaders, but this time it is with our staffs, parents, colleagues, and board members, not just our students. This is a moment of resonance.

Great leaders move us. They do it through establishing a resonance with others around them. Like provoking a moment of learning in a student, resonance is a catalyst that brings out the best in people. This resonance spreads by emotional contagion throughout the organization. It works the same way in classrooms, teams, families, and communities. Some of the impressive results from school-based-management programs are a testament to what can happen in the most resource-starved settings when school leaders, teachers, staff members, and others find a positive resonance.

The root of this resonance is in the brain. According to what is known as “open-loop theory,” our emotions operate within an open system that depends in part on external sources to manage itself. Compare this with our circulatory system—a closed-loop system whose operation affects only the individual and no one else. As a result, *emotions are contagious*—we can alter the feelings and moods of others just by being around them.

We know as teachers that we set the emotional tone of the classroom. On our bad days, the students seem unruly or particularly “dense.” On our good days, they are eager to learn, and although the noise level in the classroom may go off the scale, it is because they are excited—learning has become fun. This tone- setting is particularly critical for leaders, because emotions spread most readily from the top down. Leaders set the emotional tone for everyone around them—for better or for worse.

Breakthroughs in brain research show why a leader’s moods and actions have enormous impact on those they lead, and shed fresh light on the power of emotionally intelligent leadership to arouse passion and enthusiasm, keep people motivated and committed, and consequently, to affect people’s performance and potential.

Emotional intelligence can be defined as the intelligent use of one’s emotions. More specifically, it is the ability to be self-aware and manage oneself, to be socially aware and manage one’s relationships. Recent studies tell us that these abilities are driven by a neural circuitry that emanates in the limbic system (the midbrain area in which emotional memory resides) and moves through to the prefrontal cortex to lead to action.

These components of emotional intelligence enable us to establish the relationships and resonance that bring out the best in people. These are the crucial ingredients to teachers like Mr. Alston or great leaders in our educational institutions that enable them to create a positive resonance. The contagious spread occurs because of the emotional connections among people that are the basis for our interactions. Studies have even shown that the physiological aspects of people, such as their heart rates, move closer together when they are working together in this type of resonance. When people experience this resonance, they can be said to be “on the same wavelength.” They are, literally as well as figuratively, tuned in to one another.

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It would be easy to conclude that because of the neural basis of these abilities, leaders must be born with them. Studies published in the last several years, however, show us the opposite. Neural plasticity is real. Adults *can* develop new neural tissue, as well as create new neural pathways. We can rewire our brains. This appears to be the basis for the possible changes in habits or behavioral patterns we have developed over the years.

In other words, we can develop emotional intelligence. But it is not done easily.

From longitudinal studies of 25- to 35-year-olds and 45- to 55-year-olds it has been shown that adults can develop these emotional-intelligence abilities and behavioral habits. The results show significant sustained improvement even five to seven years after the development program began. But the process involved is one not typical of our education or training programs. Though it may look like common sense, it is far from common practice. And so, the lack of evidence from most education and training programs leaves us with the impression that, where leadership qualities are concerned, a person either “has it” or does not.

Educators should find it reassuring to know that, as adults, we can learn and change in these crucial ways. The crux of such change—and of leadership development itself—is *self-directed learning*: intentionally developing or strengthening an aspect of who you are or who you want to be, or both. Self-directed learning involves five “discoveries,” each representing a discontinuity—something that gives our efforts toward change a sense of urgency. It starts with why we want to improve our emotional intelligence and proceeds, like the students’ learning in Mr. Alston’s classroom, through what often seem like epiphanies along a recursive process. Here, briefly, are some of the steps in that process:

- **The Motivation to Change.** The motivation or drive needed to sustain a change starts with discovery No. 1: *the ideal self*. When you go through the process of uncovering an ideal vision of yourself, you feel motivated to develop your abilities. That is, you see the person you want to be. No matter how it comes to you, the image is powerful enough to evoke your passion and hope. It becomes the fuel that maintains the drive you need to work at the difficult and often frustrating process of change. And it requires a great deal of self-awareness. So if someone has become anesthetized to his dreams and aspirations, he must learn self-awareness at the same time as discovering his ideal self. This is the step in the process most often overlooked in leadership-development efforts.

The motivation to change also comes from a sense of who you are. That is discovery No. 2: *the real self*. This is similar to looking into a mirror to determine who you actually are now—how you act, how others view you, and what your deep beliefs are. Some of these observations will be consistent with your ideal self, and can be considered strengths; others will represent gaps between who you are and who you want to be. This realization of your strengths and gaps paves the way for change.

Because the drive to change is rooted in the person’s *ideal* and *real* selves, we call it a self-directed learning process. Because it is awkward and at times embarrassing, we often avoid confronting the data about how we really act with others. Similarly, we defuse the motivation to change by all too often focusing on our gaps and not celebrating and using our strengths.

- **The Readiness to Change.** For change to succeed, you need to develop an agenda for using your strengths and improving your abilities. This is discovery No. 3: *the learning agenda*. A plan of action must be constructed—one that provides detailed guidance on what new activities and habits of mind to try each day: how to build on your strengths and move yourself closer to your ideal. The plan should feel fundamentally satisfying, fitting your learning preferences as well as the realities of your life and work.
- **The Metamorphosis.** Discovery No. 4 is experimenting and practicing the new habits, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery. Experimenting with new behaviors and seizing opportunities to practice them eventually triggers in the brain the neural connections necessary for genuine change to occur. The more time spent on practicing, the greater the payoff.
- **Developing Supportive Relationships.** The fifth discovery can occur at any point in the process. It is knowing that, although your journey must be self-directed, you cannot change alone.

We need others to identify our ideal self or find our real self, to discover our strengths and gaps, to develop an agenda for the future, and to experiment and practice. Development can only occur in the tumult and possibilities of our relationships. Others help us see things we are missing, affirm whatever progress we have made, test our perceptions, let us know how we are doing. They provide the context for experimentation and practice. Without others' involvement, lasting change can't occur.

Most of us in education are still excited by learning and helping. We want to help our students discover life. We want to create for them the kind of positive resonance that spurs curiosity, builds confidence, aids creative expression. But we sometimes exhaust ourselves and leave little energy for seeking this same kind of positive emotional resonance with each other.

We *can* have the same dramatic impact on one another. We can be urgently caught up in the task of learning new ways to pursue our mission through mutual leadership. Our institutions can be vibrant, exciting places?but it takes leaders ready, willing, and able to promote the contagion of emotional intelligence, and to create a resonance that brings out the best in all of us.

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