

**S**ue Langley (pictured) is the founder and CEO of Emotional Intelligence Worldwide, which provides practical applications of emotional intelligence (EI), positive psychology and neuroscience to help individuals achieve the best possible outcomes for themselves and their organisations. She has worked with companies such as Oracle and Coca-Cola Amatil, and is the author of 'Positive Relationships at Work' in Positive Relationships by Sue Roffey (Springer 2012), and two children's books based on positive psychology principles. Here she explains why wellbeing, decision-making and leadership should all be informed by intelligent use of emotions.

**Q:** How do you apply positive psychology and emotional intelligence (EI) to the field of leadership and the business world?

**A:** We are working in increasingly complex and competitive environments. Organisations and the people in them are trying to achieve more with fewer resources and greater pressure. Many are challenged with engaging employees and establishing competitive advantage during rapid change and constant uncertainty. Raising productivity, integrating new approaches and succeeding in global markets demands greater flexibility, cultural sensitivity and collaboration.

Those who create and sustain strong business results in this climate engage hearts and minds, managing complex, often competing, agendas with savvy and awareness. EI – the intelligent use of emotion – underpins our capacity to

work well with others, manage stress and make effective decisions. These abilities can be measured and learned. We focus on the practical side of emotions in the sphere of positive psychology. Most of our work is around leadership or culture change, using what we know from a neuroscience or psychological research perspective. We use that research to try to make it real and practical for people in the business world or for their personal lives.

**Q:** Does this mean there is an urgent need in the business world to change the culture?

**A:** It is true that most businesses want to change their culture into something much more positive. A lot of organisations run engagement surveys and the cynical view is: "Why do we run engagement surveys?" We don't run them because we necessarily want people to be engaged *per se*, we run them because, if people are more engaged, stakeholders reap the rewards because of higher performance and higher productivity.

Research coming out of neuroscience and positive psychology shows that where people experience more positive emotions at work, they tend to be more engaged. We know that if people experience emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride and love it actually has what positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson terms the "broaden-and-build effect", as increasing positive emotions build enduring personal resources, enabling us to manage stressful situations and propelling us in



"upward spirals" towards optimal performance, wellbeing and growth.

Positive emotions also lessen the resonance of negative experience and provide a powerful antidote to anxiety. Additionally, they strengthen our social resources, in that we create new bonds, while bolstering existing ones, which is again useful for businesses.

Many of the organisations we work with want to break down the silo effect [the lack of communication across departments in large businesses] and achieve greater degrees of collaboration. Positive emotions encourage open-mindedness and flexibility, enabling us to generate more creative solutions, connect with others, take on critical feedback and persist in achieving goals.

Lastly, EI helps build physical resources. We now recognise how emotions can be linked to the immune system. Recent research in China found that only eight weeks of integrated mind/body meditation helps build white matter in the pre-frontal cortex. So positive emotions and

# MORE THAN A FEELING

SMART USE OF EMOTIONS, SAYS **SUE LANGLEY**, CAN IMPROVE OUR CAPACITY TO WORK WELL WITH OTHERS, ENGAGE WITH OUR JOBS, MANAGE STRESS AND MAKE MORE EFFECTIVE DECISIONS. WELCOME TO A WORLD OF EQ (EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE QUOTIENT) OVER IQ



01 activities linked to positive psychology actually increase physical brain resources, leading to higher productivity, better performance and, consequently, greater engagement.

**Q:** Are organisations able to see tangible financial results from their work on EI and positive psychology?

**A:** We have long-term clients who have found that absenteeism and sick leave was reduced by 40 per cent in their organisation [thanks to a focus on EI], which represents a significant improvement in performance and a large reduction in costs. One not-for-profit organisation saw its income triple, because they were projecting a different message and because of the way in which its teams were working, particularly around resilience.

Studies show that entrepreneurs and small-business owners who use EI skills to create positive cultures increase revenue and growth, while managers who show worry, frustration and bewilderment undermine entrepreneurial motivation. A lot of organisations focus on physical wellbeing, yet sometimes they sideline mental and emotional wellbeing and, in doing so, fail to teach their staff strategies from an emotions perspective. If you don't get the emotional piece right, you can teach people

about exercise until they are blue in the face, yet they still won't want to do it if they don't understand the benefits.

It's important to understand the way the brain works and how emotions drive us – whether for wellbeing, decision-making, leadership or change. A leader who is aware of his or her emotional impact and can influence the mood of their team by building and sustaining positivity will help shape organisational climate, increasing performance. So-called “emotional contagion” can have a powerful effect within groups – both positive and negative.

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**Q:** How can you train people in EI in cases where it may not come naturally?

**A:** Genetic predisposition can make some people more emotionally intelligent than others,

yet EI can be learned and developed in adults over time. Humans are wired for lifelong growth and learning. Our brain cells are continually forming new connections and restructuring our perceptions and physiology. This process of neuroplasticity happens thousands of times a day, facilitating enormous potential for change if we put awareness, effort and commitment into making it happen. Neurogenesis – the brain's ability to grow new cells even in adulthood – is linked to learning.

The media likes to portray EI as a “happy-clappy” discipline, but while we teach how the brain works in a fun and simple way, underpinning it all is science. Once you go back to the science, nobody can deny that emotions are important. EI can be taught, and if I can read people's emotions and responses better as a leader, then I can adjust my behaviour accordingly.

If we teach people that emotions are just data and information, then the more information I've got, the better equipped I am to make my decision. It's about integrating that data into my decision-making process.

We also do a lot of work with organisations around strengths, which is a key element of positive psychology. For instance, most performance reviews go along these lines: “These are your strengths, these are your weaknesses – or ‘development opportunities’.” Then people spend the next 20 minutes creating goals around their “development opportunities”. In contrast to your strengths

– the things that energise you and that you perform well at – your development opportunities are the tasks you don't enjoy and don't do well. Now, consider how you might feel if you had to focus on the things you *don't*

enjoy and that you perform badly at *every day*. We shouldn't pretend these weaknesses don't exist, yet if we can change the way the team, and individuals, work, those weaknesses can become less impactful. If you are working on your strengths every day, you feel more positive, more energised and more engaged. You'll find that your “development opportunities” improve. If you focus on your “development opportunities”, you'll be more drained, more fed up, less engaged, and your strengths will be impacted. We work with leaders around how to have strength-based conversations with their team members, so they can build their culture from a strength-based approach.

**Q:** Why are people afraid of emotions, especially in the world of leadership?

**A:** Let's imagine I am a leader and one of my team is upset. When they get teary, I may think, “Oh, god, what am I going to do? How awkward. What now?” People get nervous around dealing with emotions. It's the same if someone has been absent because a loved-one died. When they return to work, nobody asks about their loved-one. People say it is because they don't want to upset them, yet what they are really saying is, “I don't want to upset that person because I will have to deal with it.” We shy away, or fail to use our emotions effectively.

There are leaders who, when they get stressed or emotional, lash out. They become domineering and controlling, and their team members don't know how to handle them. Some women become teary when they get angry, then get upset and embarrassed with themselves for crying. Aligning emotions with information, and learning what that information is telling you, relieves that sense of failure at feeling emotion, and can help leaders know how to deal with other people's emotional responses.

**Q:** The 20th century has been described as the century of the IQ, and the 21st century as that of the EQ [emotional intelligence quotient]. Do you agree with that statement?

**A:** We are increasingly moving in that direction, because, if you're a leader, you have to get



02 things done through people. Human beings are emotional and social creatures, so the better an understanding we have of the emotional element and the connection we need, the better we will do from a business perspective. It's about properly understanding what EI is. Some people think of it as *being* emotional, or some kind of cure-all solution; what it implies is the intelligent *use* of emotions. We can retrain our brains so we can experience more positive emotions – not that negative emotions are bad, as there is always a reason for them.

**Q:** Is the brain the last frontier for science?

**A:** I am not sure about that. I am also interested in gene expression and quantum physics. And

yet it's true that there is a lot of interest in neuroscience. Many organisations are pouring money into brain research. Understanding how the brain works enables us to harness its potential and be more effective, emotionally intelligent leaders. There is a lot we are discovering about the brain, and translating these discoveries into practical applications allows more organisations to reap the results.

01 Positive emotions in the workplace lead to higher productivity and better performance  
02 Meditation can increase physical brain resources in areas such as the pre-frontal cortex