

Psychosocial Hazards and Emotional Intelligence

Curating a safe workplace through
emotionally intelligent leadership



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Introduction

Why Emotional Intelligence Matters for Psychosocial Safety

As psychosocial hazards become an increasing concern in today's workplaces, organisations are searching for more holistic, preventative strategies to support mental wellbeing, reduce risk, and create psychologically safe environments. While policies, procedures, and reporting frameworks are vital, one critical – and often overlooked – factor is the emotional intelligence of individuals and leaders across the organisation.

This white paper explores how emotional intelligence (EI) plays a central role in mitigating psychosocial risks and strengthening psychological safety. Drawing on recent research and practical application, it provides insight into how targeted development of EI capabilities can serve as both a protective factor and a proactive intervention in workplace wellbeing and safety strategies.

Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Safety - Understanding the Link

EI refers to 'a set of emotional and social skills that influence the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges, and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way'. These capabilities include self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, interpersonal skills, and stress tolerance. In the context of workplace safety, these skills help create environments where employees feel heard, respected, and psychologically secure.

Research consistently shows that emotionally intelligent individuals are better equipped to manage conflict, respond calmly under pressure, and support others through change and uncertainty. As a result, teams with higher levels of collective emotional intelligence typically report fewer interpersonal issues, lower levels of work-related stress, and stronger trust in leadership.¹

Psychosocial Risk and the Role of Leadership

The quality of leadership plays a defining role in workplace psychological safety. Leaders with low emotional intelligence may unintentionally undermine wellbeing through poor communication, inconsistent behaviour, or an inability to manage emotionally charged situations. In contrast, emotionally intelligent leaders can regulate their own responses, create space for open dialogue, and support employees through challenge and change.²

A positive psychosocial safety climate (PSC) – the shared belief that psychological health is prioritised and protected – is strongly correlated with increased engagement, lower

¹ Shkembi, F. & Treska, V. (2024), The Influence of Emotional Intelligence in the choice of conflict resolution strategy. *British Journal of Psychology Research*, 12 (1), pp 1-25.

² Coronado-Maldonado, I. & Benitez-Marquez, M. (2023), EI, Leadership, and work teams: A hybrid literature review. *Heliyon*. Vol 9, Issue 10.

absenteeism, and improved productivity.³ Developing emotionally intelligent leadership is a direct and measurable way to build this kind of climate.

Embedding Emotional Intelligence into Capability and Risk Frameworks

This white paper is designed as a practical resource for HR, People & Culture, and Work Health and Safety professionals seeking to embed emotional intelligence into their organisation's risk mitigation strategies and capability development programs.

For HR and culture practitioners, the document offers guidance on identifying the EI capabilities most relevant to the psychosocial challenges within your organisation. Whether you are designing leadership development, wellbeing initiatives, or culture-building programs, intentionally targeting EI can amplify the impact of these interventions.

For WHS professionals, emotional intelligence can be positioned as a proactive control measure—strengthening the human capacity to manage stress, communicate effectively, and adapt to change. This reduces the likelihood and severity of common psychosocial risks such as workplace conflict, poor support, and inadequate role clarity.

Building Capability Using Validated Tools: From Insight to Action

To support the development of emotional intelligence at scale, organisations may choose to engage consultants certified in the EQ-i 2.0® or EQ360® assessment tools. These tools provide evidence-based insights into individual and group EI capability and can be used to inform development strategies, coaching, and risk control planning.

Alternatively, organisations seeking to embed EI into internal processes may wish to train key personnel, so they become certified in the EQ-i 2.0 emotional intelligence assessment. This enables you to independently administer assessments, debrief participants, and incorporate EI capability building into ongoing safety, leadership, and wellbeing strategies.

A Proactive Step Toward Safer, Healthier Workplaces

Incorporating emotional intelligence into your approach to psychosocial safety isn't a "soft" solution—it's a strategic one. By developing emotionally intelligent individuals and leaders, organisations can foster healthier, more resilient teams, reduce exposure to psychosocial risks, and strengthen their overall safety and wellbeing outcomes.

This paper offers a starting point to explore how emotional intelligence capabilities align with the key psychosocial hazards identified in the [Model Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work](#). Use it to inform planning, guide development priorities, and take meaningful action toward a more psychologically safe workplace.

³ Safe Work Australia Report (2016).

The Case for Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (The Research)

EI refers to 'a set of emotional and social skills that influence the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges, and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way.' It underpins our ability to work well with others, manage stress and make effective decisions. The good news is that these abilities can be measured and learned.

A compelling body of research shows that EI, more than knowledge, technical skills or traditional measures of intelligence, determines individual effectiveness and successful business outcomes.

Due to often changing market forces and pressure to accomplish more with fewer resources, leaders require more than technical knowledge to succeed in their role (George, 2000). Researchers have documented that EI skills are equally important for successful performance at the executive level (Carmeli, 2003) and becomes more critical (as compared to IQ or technical savvy) as employees progress through the organisational hierarchy (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Goleman et al., 2002).

Deloitte's Human Capital Trends 2018 report shows organisations are going through a transformation to 'social' enterprises. They are becoming more personalised and connected, with formal hierarchies breaking down to be replaced by networks of teams.

As more artificial intelligence enters the world, more emotional intelligence must enter into leadership. Ethical decision making is difficult to integrate into algorithms and requires a human, emotionally intelligent, touch.

In addition, for the first time in our history we have five generations working together creating exceedingly complex workplaces. Baby Boomers are leaving as Gen Alpha's arrive. There is a difference in expectations and work style between the generations, and these differences require well developed EI to manage and ensure employee engagement.

Background on the EQ-i 2.0 (Emotional Intelligence Assessment)

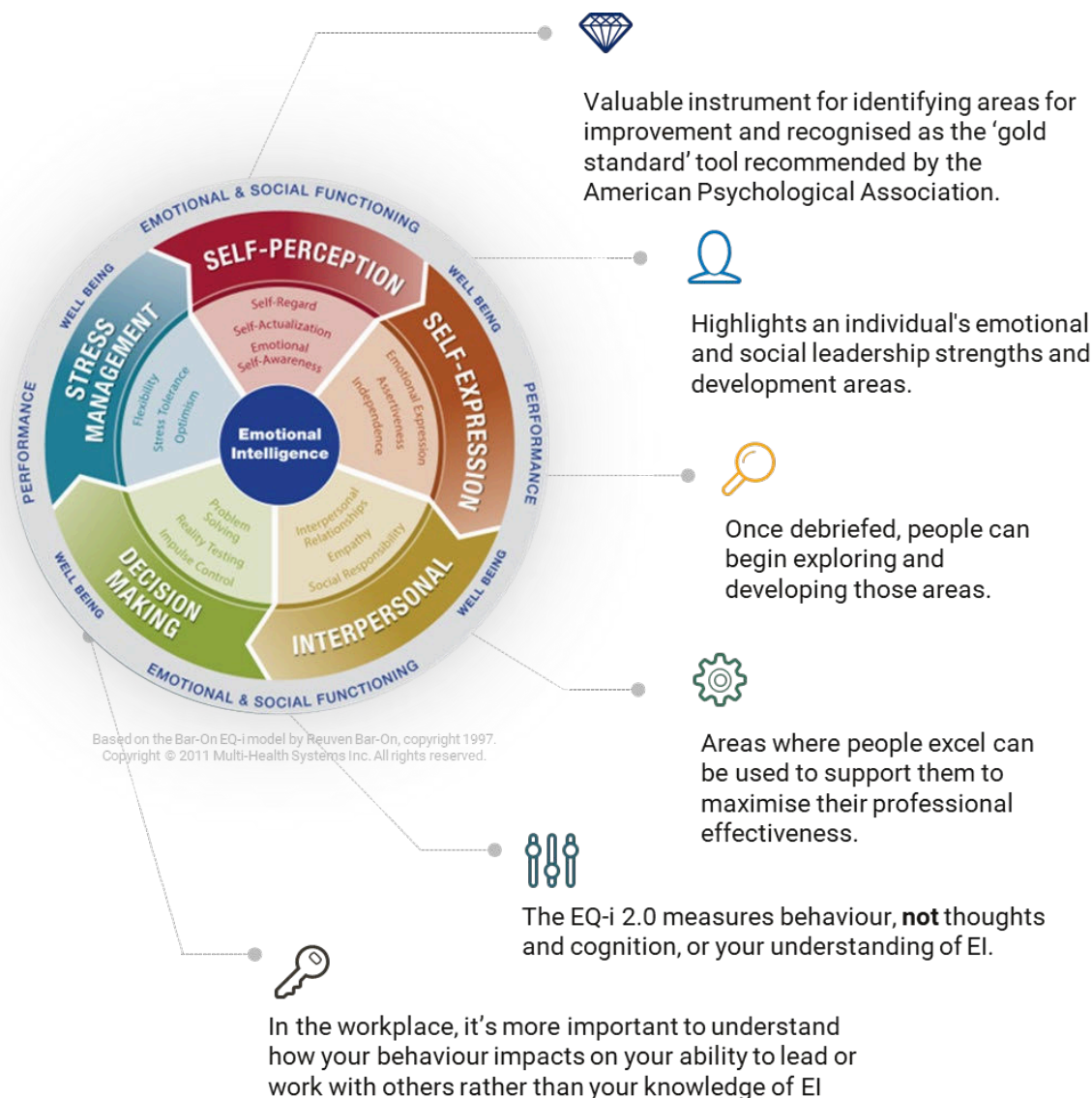
Emotional Intelligence as a discipline came out of a stream of psychology known as 'positive psychology' which was focussed on understanding well-functioning individuals, as compared to understanding pathology.

The EQ-i 2.0 was first developed by Reuven BarOn and released in 1983. It was based on clinical research he had undertaken into why particular individuals flourished compared to others who might have higher IQs. This tool has now been used for over 25 years, both clinically and within corporate environments.

There are several tools in the market that measure emotional intelligence. What makes the EQ-i 2.0 different from most is that it measures behaviour, not thoughts and cognition, or your understanding of emotional intelligence.

The EQ-i 2.0 (Emotional Intelligence Profile)

The EQ-i 2.0 is the first scientifically developed and validated measure of emotional intelligence. Based on over 25 years of research by Dr Reuven Bar-On and tested on over 200,000 people worldwide, the BarOn EQ-i is based on the most comprehensive theory of emotional intelligence to date.



EI provides powerful insights into leadership, decision making, problem solving and influence. NNC utilises the EQ-i 2.0 Inventory in a wide variety of programs as a benchmark for investigating critical leadership responsibilities that relate directly with EI scales.



Common Psychosocial Hazards and Emotional Intelligence

In this section, we outline the Emotional Intelligence capabilities that would have a positive impact on reducing the occurrence of common psychosocial hazards.

We also consider the subscale combinations that might undermine a leader's ability to create a psychologically safe environment.

Common hazards referred to are those identified in the [Model Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work](#) from Safe Work Australia.

Job Demands

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Intense or sustained high mental, physical or emotional effort required to do the job.
- Unreasonable or excessive time pressures or role overload.
- High individual reputational, legal, career, safety or financial risk if mistakes occur.
- High vigilance required, limited margin of error and inadequate systems to prevent individual error.
- Shifts/work hours that do not allow adequate time for sleep and recovery.
- Sustained low levels of physical, mental or emotional effort is required to do the job.
- Long idle periods while high workloads are present, for example where workers need to wait for equipment or other workers.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities

To effectively manage high or sustained job demands, emotional intelligence competencies such as Stress Tolerance, Reality Testing, and Flexibility are especially useful.



- **Stress Tolerance:** Helps individuals manage pressure and bounce back from high or sustained demands.
- **Reality Testing:** Enables workers to remain objective and assess workloads accurately.
- **Flexibility:** Supports adapting to fluctuating workloads or shifting priorities.

Stress Tolerance helps individuals remain calm and composed under pressure, reducing the risk of psychological strain. It supports emotional regulation in fast-paced or high-pressure environments, which is essential for sustained performance and wellbeing.

Reality Testing supports a grounded and objective evaluation of workload and expectations, ensuring that perceived demands are realistic and not distorted by stress or emotion. This clarity allows individuals to better prioritise, communicate boundaries, and make informed decisions about where to focus their energy.

Flexibility enables individuals to adjust to shifting priorities and workloads without becoming overwhelmed or resistant to change, enhancing their capacity to perform under varying conditions. Importantly, these capabilities also improve interpersonal interactions during periods of high demand—minimising reactive behaviour, fostering collaborative problem solving, and supporting a more resilient and adaptable team culture overall.

Leadership Derailers

According to Safe Work Australia, Job Demands refer to "*aspects of work that require sustained physical, mental or emotional effort.*" If not well managed, they can lead to stress or burnout.

For a leader, several EQ-i 2.0 emotional intelligence subscale combinations can directly influence their capacity to manage this hazard effectively.

For example, if a leader has **low Emotional Self-Awareness**, (that is, they are not very aware of their emotional state and what triggers their emotions), combined with **lower Reality Testing** (the ability to remain objective and see situations as they really are) and **lower Stress Tolerance**, they may not have the resilience and capability to effectively read the impact of high job demands on others. They are less likely to recognise their own emotions and have the coping strategies to deal with the stress. This leaves them vulnerable to missing the signals when others around them are heading towards burnout.

Another example would be a leader who has **high Assertiveness** and **lower Emotional Expression and Empathy**. They would likely be more directive in their communication style and less likely to read the signals regarding overwhelm and burn out as they could be overly concerned with the output.

Potentially, a leader may normalise excessive workloads and inadvertently discourage others from speaking up if they are highly resilient but have low self-awareness. Because they themselves can cope with a high workload, they may not recognise when others aren't coping. In this sort of environment, people may not feel comfortable letting them know they aren't coping as it could be seen as a failure.

Understanding a leader's emotional intelligence capabilities and building particular skills such as self-awareness, reality testing and empathy could have a significant impact on reducing the risk of poorly managed job demands.

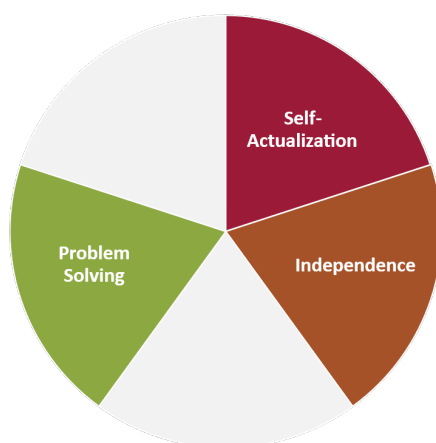
Low Job Control

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Workers have little control over aspects of the work including how or when the job is done.
- Workers have limited ability to adapt the way they work to changing or new situations.
- Workers have limited ability to adopt efficiencies in their work.
- Tightly scripted or machine/computer paced work.
- Prescriptive processes which do not allow workers to apply their skills and judgement.
- Levels of autonomy not matched to workers' abilities.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities

When workers have little influence over how or when their work is done, EQ competencies like **Independence**, **Problem Solving**, and **Self-Actualization** can provide critical support.



- **Independence:** Strengthens an individual's confidence to work autonomously when appropriate.
- **Problem Solving:** Encourages creative ways to handle work within set constraints.
- **Self-Actualization:** Drives individuals to find purpose and meaning, even with limited autonomy.

Independence enables individuals to make confident decisions within their sphere of influence, fostering a sense of personal agency even in tightly structured environments. Rather than feeling powerless, emotionally intelligent employees take initiative where they can—whether in structuring their day, managing relationships, or improving task execution. This capability helps prevent the helplessness and disengagement that often arise when autonomy is limited.

In low-control environments, workers often face stress, frustration, or confusion. High problem-solving capability helps individuals manage these emotions while thinking clearly and responding constructively. It allows them to approach challenges calmly and logically, identify opportunities for improvement within constraints, and seek collaborative or creative paths forward. Self-Actualization, meanwhile, keeps individuals anchored in personal goals and values, helping them find meaning and fulfilment in their work—even when they cannot control the process.

Together, these emotional intelligence competencies promote resilience and emotional balance in the face of restricted autonomy. They support a mindset of adaptability, internal motivation, and practical action—enabling employees to stay engaged and psychologically well and helping organisations reduce the risks associated with low job control.

Leadership Derailers

Low Job Control is a significant psychosocial hazard, and it has a very different psychological profile from Job Demands. Where high job demands are about too much, low job control is about too little—autonomy, agency, and decision-making power.

For leaders trying to manage or buffer the effects of this hazard (especially in rigid or structured environments), certain EQ-i 2.0 subscale combinations can undermine their efforts if imbalanced.

EQ-i 2.0 Profiles with **high Problem Solving** together with **high Impulse Control** and **low Flexibility** can suggest a leader who is more likely to micromanage and impose systems without flexibility. They could be more rigid in their approach and how they want to see things completed. This can restrict the autonomy of individuals.

Another example would be a leader who is overly confident in their own perspective and viewpoint, and who is less open to hearing others' perspectives and contributions. When we see very **high Self Regard** with **high Independence** but **lower** scores on scales such as **Flexibility, Empathy** and **Interpersonal Relationships**, this can show us someone who is less likely to involve others in planning or decision making especially if they think they might have a different perspective to their own.

Working with leaders to understand why they might micromanage or hold tightly to their own way of doing things could open them up to transforming their leadership style. There is likely to be some beliefs about their own efforts that are getting in the way of empowering their team.

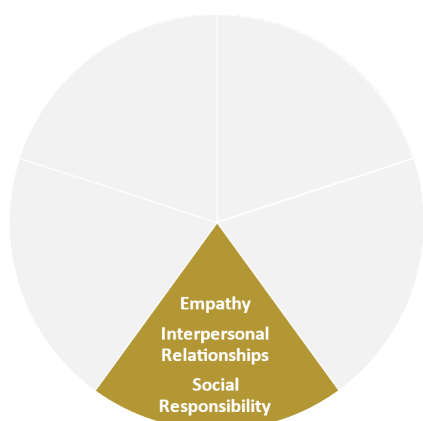
Poor Support

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Tasks or jobs where workers have inadequate support including practical assistance and emotional support from managers and colleagues, or inadequate training, tools and resources for a task.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities

In workplaces where support from managers or colleagues is lacking, emotional intelligence components such as **Empathy**, **Interpersonal Relationships**, and **Social Responsibility** can play a pivotal role in creating a more connected and resilient culture.



- **Empathy:** Builds stronger interpersonal understanding and supportive relationships.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Fosters connection and mutual assistance among team members.
- **Social Responsibility:** Encourages leaders and peers to contribute to a collaborative culture.

Poor support can lead to feelings of isolation, frustration, and burnout—especially in high-demand or emotionally taxing environments. When formal structures of support are weak, emotionally intelligent individuals can help fill the gaps by fostering trust, collaboration, and emotional connection.

Empathy allows individuals to recognise and understand the feelings of others, creating space for meaningful conversations and emotional validation. When people feel heard and understood, even by peers rather than leaders, it contributes to psychological safety and emotional resilience.

Interpersonal Relationships, another key EQ-i 2.0 competency, focuses on the ability to develop and maintain mutually satisfying relationships. This skill enables individuals to build networks of informal support, engage in positive social exchanges, and contribute to a sense of belonging within the team.

Social Responsibility involves acting with a sense of duty and care for the wellbeing of the group. In low-support environments, this competency encourages individuals to check in on teammates, offer help, and contribute to a shared sense of purpose. When cultivated across a team or organisation, these emotional intelligence capabilities can help compensate for gaps in formal support by building a culture where people genuinely look out for one another. Over time, this peer-driven support can influence broader cultural shifts and improve overall workplace morale and cohesion.

Leadership Derailers

Poor Support is one of the most impactful psychosocial hazards because it undermines psychological safety and team cohesion. When workers feel unsupported—by systems, supervisors, or co-workers—it can erode trust, performance, and wellbeing.

From an EQ-i 2.0 perspective, a leader's ability to prevent or address poor support is strongly shaped by how they show up emotionally and relationally. An example of some of the subscale combinations that hinder their effectiveness in managing this hazard is when we see **lower Emotional Self-Awareness** with **Lower Emotional Expression** and **lower Empathy**. This is likely to be someone who feels that they do not always pay attention to or recognise their emotional state, aren't tapping into the emotions or situation of others and finds it difficult to articulate their opinions, thoughts and feelings. This type of leader can come across as emotionally disconnected and is less likely to acknowledge emotional needs or personal struggles that require support.

Another combination that might impact on a leader's ability to provide support is when they demonstrate **highly Independent** behaviours together with a **lower** score on the **Interpersonal Relationships** subscale. At the extreme, they could seem unapproachable. They also are unlikely to provide their team with feedback on their performance as they don't need it themselves. Team members may feel they cannot afford to show they are lacking in confidence, skill or ability to this person.

To a lesser degree, a leader with extremely **high Optimism** that isn't balanced with **Reality Testing** and also has **high Impulse Control**, might assume things will work out without recognising or evaluating limitations. They could delay or avoid taking action to fix any gaps in support that are required.

Providing leaders with a framework for understanding what motivates their team, what is important to them, and getting a good handle on their capabilities can assist with reducing the potential for this workplace hazard.

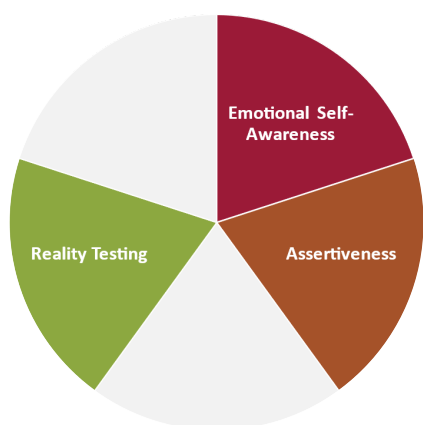
Lack of Role Clarity

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Uncertainty, frequent changes, conflicting roles or ambiguous responsibilities and expectations.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities

Ambiguity around roles, responsibilities, and expectations is a common psychosocial hazard that can lead to confusion, frustration, and disengagement. When individuals are unsure about what is expected of them—or how their role fits into the bigger picture—it becomes harder to prioritise tasks, measure success, or maintain motivation. Emotional intelligence competencies such as **Reality Testing**, **Emotional Self-Awareness**, and **Assertiveness** are essential for managing these challenges constructively.



- **Reality Testing:** Helps individuals discern facts from assumptions about their roles.
- **Self-Awareness:** Aids in recognising when clarity is lacking and initiating conversations.
- **Assertiveness:** Enables people to ask for clarification confidently and constructively.

Reality Testing, as defined by the EQ-i 2.0 model, enables individuals to remain grounded and objective, even in uncertain or ill-defined situations. It helps them assess whether their perceptions are accurate and pinpoint specific areas where clarity is lacking. Rather than making assumptions or relying on guesswork, they can identify the gaps and take thoughtful steps to address them.

Emotional Self-Awareness allows individuals to tune into how the lack of role clarity is affecting them emotionally—whether it’s stress, anxiety, or self-doubt. Recognising these emotional responses is the first step in managing them effectively and preventing them from clouding judgment or escalating into broader dissatisfaction.

Assertiveness empowers individuals to take action by communicating their need for clarification in a confident and respectful manner. This includes speaking up in meetings, requesting clearer guidelines from supervisors, or seeking alignment with colleagues. Together, these EI capabilities foster a sense of control, support healthier communication, and help create a culture where uncertainty is addressed rather than avoided. Over time, this can lead to stronger role definition and improved organisational performance.

Leadership Derailers

Lack of Role Clarity is a key psychosocial hazard that often flies under the radar but causes a lot of low-grade stress, confusion, and interpersonal tension. It can lead to duplicated effort, conflict, missed deadlines, and frustration for both leaders and their teams.

From an EQ-i 2.0 lens, role clarity relies heavily on a leader's communication, emotional insight, and ability to manage ambiguity.

A leader that has **high Emotional Expression** and **Empathy** but has **lower in Assertiveness** may not be clear in setting expectations. They may allow others to determine the critical components of their roles rather than being directive and providing specificity.

In contrast, a leader who has **lower Emotional Self-Awareness** and **Interpersonal Relationships**, but **very high Independence** may not provide sufficient clarity. They may assume that people know what is expected and that they will operate autonomously. They may not be closely engaged with their team such that they are not undertaking regular catch ups to discuss work outcomes and priorities.

A leader who is **high in Flexibility, Stress Tolerance** and **Independence** but **lower in Assertiveness** or **Empathy** is likely to tolerate ambiguity and dysfunction and may not recognise that others aren't as comfortable when work expectations are unclear. Because they are easily able to adapt and can cope with a high degree of stress, they may not recognise the needs of others.

Confirming the type of relationship that a leader has with their team and their operational rhythms in terms of feedback and performance management is important when considering how to avoid issues with role clarity.

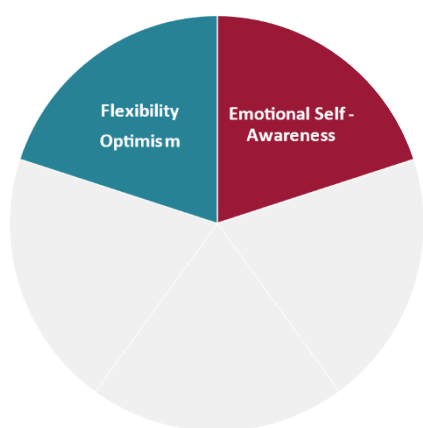
Poor Organisational Change Management

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Insufficient consultation, consideration of new hazards or performance impacts when planning for, and implementing, change.
- Insufficient support, information or training during change.
- Not communicating key information to workers during periods of change.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities

Poorly managed change can create significant disruption in the workplace. When communication is unclear, timelines shift, or expectations are left undefined, employees often experience confusion, resistance, and emotional fatigue. In these moments, emotional intelligence competencies such as **Flexibility**, **Optimism**, and **Emotional Self-Awareness** become vital tools for coping and maintaining performance.



- **Flexibility:** Encourages adaptability during transitions.
- **Optimism:** Supports a positive outlook and trust in the process.
- **Emotional Self-Awareness:** Helps individuals understand their reactions to change and regulate them effectively.

Flexibility refers to an individual's ability to adjust their thoughts, emotions, and behaviour in response to changing circumstances. In the face of unclear or inconsistent change management, flexible individuals are more likely to adapt constructively rather than becoming rigid, resentful, or disengaged. This adaptability supports a smoother transition and helps reduce stress both for the individual and their team.

Optimism plays a critical role in shaping how people perceive and respond to uncertainty. Those with higher optimism are more inclined to see challenges as temporary and manageable, which sustains motivation and reduces the risk of burnout during prolonged change. Optimism can also be contagious—positively influencing team morale and helping others reframe difficult situations.

Emotional Self-Awareness ensures individuals stay attuned to their internal responses throughout change. Recognising emotions such as anxiety, frustration, or confusion allows them to manage these feelings before they spill over into their behaviour. By regulating their emotional responses, individuals are better equipped to respond thoughtfully, communicate effectively, and remain open to new possibilities—even when change is poorly executed. Together, these capabilities foster resilience and reduce the psychosocial risks associated with poorly managed transitions.

Leadership Derailers

Organisational Change Management is one of the most emotionally charged psychosocial hazards, and a leader's emotional intelligence can either ease the transition or intensify the disruption.

When change is handled poorly—without consultation, planning, or support—it creates confusion, anxiety, and resistance. Here are some of the EQ-i 2.0 subscale combinations that can derail a leader's ability to lead well through change.

Leaders who are **lower** on **Emotional Expression** and **Empathy** but **higher** on **Problem Solving** and **Reality Testing** are likely to focus on facts and data rather than the emotional impact or motivation behind decisions. They could expect others to get on board with the idea due to the data or logic pointing in a particular direction, without considering how to emotionally engage people with the idea or decision. They may not consider the impact on others in their communication or acknowledge other's emotions during a change process.

Highly confident leaders who have **high Assertiveness** and **Independence** may believe they are the expert and provide their viewpoint on the required changes without consulting others. They have the potential to misread how others are responding or may not understand that they can't speak for everyone.

There are many leadership derailers for this psychosocial hazard, as change is not often done well within organisations. People respond to change in different ways, so leaders must manage their own emotional state and build strong connections with their teams to give change initiatives the best chance of being embraced.

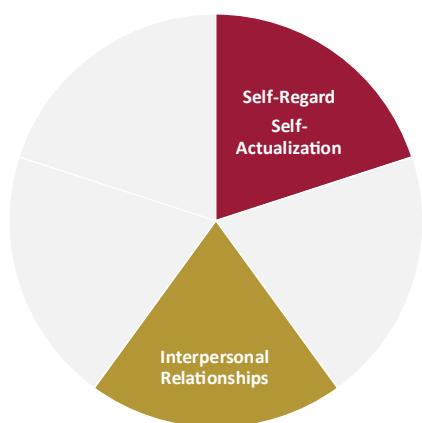
Inadequate Recognition and Reward

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Jobs with low positive feedback or imbalances between effort and recognition.
- High level of unconstructive negative feedback from managers or customers.
- Low skills development opportunity or underused skills.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities

When workers feel undervalued or unrecognised, it can lead to disengagement, reduced motivation, and even burnout over time. Recognition—whether formal or informal—is a key contributor to workplace satisfaction and psychological safety. In its absence, emotional intelligence competencies such as **Self-Regard**, **Self-Actualization**, and **Interpersonal Relationships** become essential for preserving personal wellbeing and sustaining performance.



- **Self-Regard:** Builds inner confidence not solely reliant on external validation.
- **Self-Actualization:** Encourages ongoing personal growth regardless of external rewards.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Reinforces informal recognition through peer connection.

Self-Regard fosters an internalised sense of self-worth that is not solely dependent on external praise or validation. Individuals with high Self-Regard understand their own value and capabilities, allowing them to remain confident and focused even when their efforts go unnoticed. This inner confidence helps protect against feelings of inadequacy or resentment, which often surface when recognition is lacking.

Self-Actualization supports individuals in connecting to their personal goals, values, and sense of purpose. It drives them to find meaning in their work, invest in their development, and pursue excellence—not just for rewards, but for personal fulfillment. This intrinsic motivation can sustain engagement and protect against apathy or stagnation in unsupportive environments. Individuals can assess their own performance rather than looking for recognition from others.

Meanwhile, **Interpersonal Relationships** can foster a sense of belonging and connection. Even if recognition is not provided formally by managers, strong peer relationships often lead to informal appreciation, encouragement, and shared success. These interactions help individuals feel seen, valued, and emotionally supported—building team morale and buffering against the negative impact of feeling overlooked. Cultivating these emotional intelligence competencies equips individuals to thrive, even in recognition-poor environments.

Leadership Derailers

Inadequate Recognition and Reward taps directly into core emotional needs like fairness, value, and personal growth. When these needs aren't met, it can fuel disengagement, resentment, burnout, and presenteeism. And while systems play a role, a leader's emotional intelligence significantly shapes how recognition and reward are experienced day to day.

Let's break down some of the EQ-i 2.0 subscale combinations that most influence a leader's ability to foster a culture of genuine recognition—and what can go wrong when the wrong subscale patterns show up.

A leader who is **extremely high** on **Self Regard** and **Independence** is unlikely to need external validation and may miss the opportunity to provide this to others. They may not take the time to recognise their team's efforts or reward them for performance, as they don't need this themselves.

When we see leaders with **lower Emotional Expression** and **lower Interpersonal Relationships** results, we can expect they may be less comfortable providing positive feedback to others on their performance. They may not have practiced the skills involved with engaging with others or having the level of emotional literacy required for these conversations.

Another combination which might impact on providing reward and recognition of performance is **high Emotional Expression** with **high Assertiveness** but **lower Reality Testing**. In this situation a leader may be confident to provide feedback, but it could be misaligned. They may praise visible contributors and potentially ignore 'behind the scenes' efforts.

Being mindful of when and how to provide adequate recognition and rewards is often impacted by a leader's personal needs, their ability to step away from the day-to-day delivery to see what has transpired, and the emotional literacy to make it meaningful. Oftentimes positive feedback can be perceived as patronising, non-specific or transactional rather than a genuine recognition of someone's talents and what they bring to the role.

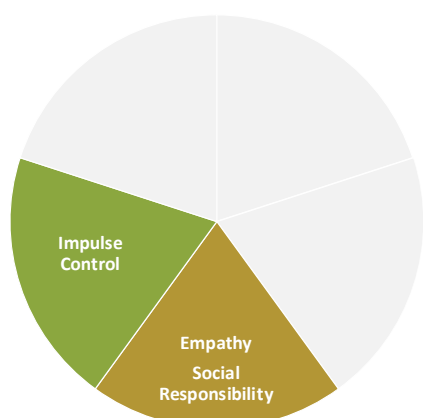
Poor Organisational Justice

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Inconsistent, unfair, discriminatory or inequitable management decisions and application of policies, including poor procedural justice.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there is Poor Organisational Justice.

When organisational decisions are perceived as inconsistent, unjust, or lacking transparency, trust can quickly erode. Employees may feel frustrated, powerless, or disrespected—especially when they see others being treated more favourably or when the rationale behind decisions is unclear. In these situations, emotional intelligence competencies such as **Empathy**, **Social Responsibility**, and **Impulse Control** can help reduce the emotional and relational fallout.



- **Empathy:** Supports leaders in understanding how decisions impact others.
- **Social Responsibility:** Encourages fairness and ethical treatment of all workers.
- **Impulse Control:** Helps individuals respond calmly to perceived unfairness.

Empathy allows individuals—especially leaders—to tune into the emotional impact of their decisions. When employees feel seen and understood, they are more likely to remain engaged, even if they don't agree with the outcome. Leaders who demonstrate genuine empathy can acknowledge concerns and communicate with sensitivity, helping to rebuild trust and credibility in the face of difficult decisions.

Social Responsibility reinforces a commitment to fairness, integrity, and the wellbeing of the broader team or organisation. When this competency is strong, individuals are more likely to speak up constructively, advocate for ethical standards, and strive for outcomes that benefit others—not just themselves. It creates a cultural expectation of accountability and justice.

Impulse Control, meanwhile, plays a crucial role in managing emotional reactions to perceived unfairness. Rather than reacting with anger, withdrawal, or passive resistance, emotionally intelligent individuals can pause, reflect, and respond more thoughtfully. This reduces the likelihood of conflict and helps maintain professionalism, even when emotions run high. Together, these competencies support a more principled, respectful, and emotionally resilient workplace during times of tension or perceived injustice.

Leadership Derailers

Organisational Justice ties deeply into emotional intelligence because it's all about how people feel they're being treated—fairly, transparently, and with respect. When people perceive a lack of justice, it undermines trust, morale, and psychological safety. It can also fuel conflict, high turnover, and serious reputational risk for a team or organisation.

There a number of EQ subscales that could derail a leader's ability to uphold organisational justice, especially when it's most needed. **Lower Empathy** with **high Independence** shows us a leader who may be less likely to understand how decisions affect others. They may not be reading the emotional tone of situations and the impact.

Lower Social Responsibility results can often show us someone who is more focussed on individual concerns than viewing the greater good or the importance of ethical behaviour for the wider team or organisation. They may not recognise the need to consider how individual actions fit in with the broader strategic imperatives or requirements of the organisation.

On a simpler level, transparency in decision making can be undermined by **lower** results in **Emotional Expression** with **higher** scores in **Assertiveness** and **Problem Solving**. A leader with this combination may not always provide the motivations behind their decisions and may be perceived as not being transparent or provide sufficient explanation.

If an organisation has long-term injustice embedded in the culture, then a leader who is less comfortable with change and more accepting of the status quo, may allow this to continue. A leader who is highly resilient, has **high Impulse Control** but **lower Flexibility** and **Assertiveness** will be less likely to speak up and could inadvertently normalise chronic unfairness with a perspective that it is just the way it is, and everyone just has to do deal with it.

Fairness and equity are also part of Organisational Justice. Individual's may feel unfairly treated if policies aren't applied consistently or poor performers aren't called out for their behaviour. **Lower Self Regard** with **lower Assertiveness** and **high Empathy** could show us a leader who may not have the courage to undertake performance conversations when required which could undermine a sense of fairness and equity among team members.

We know that some work environments have inadvertently embedded injustice into the culture and this can be perpetuated by leaders who don't have the capability or emotional intelligence to call out inconsistent, unfair, discriminatory or inequitable management decisions and application of policies.

Traumatic Events or Material

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Experiencing fear or extreme risks to the health or safety of themselves or others.
- Exposure to natural disasters, or seriously injured or deceased persons.
- Reading, hearing or seeing accounts of traumatic events, abuse or neglect.
- Supporting victims or investigating traumatic events, abuse or neglect.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there are traumatic events or material.

In the face of traumatic experiences—such as workplace accidents, critical incidents, or ongoing exposure to distressing material—emotional intelligence capabilities can provide a crucial buffer against psychological harm. Without effective coping strategies, these experiences can lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and long-term impacts on mental health. EQ competencies such as **Emotional Expression**, **Stress Tolerance**, and **Reality Testing** are particularly important for supporting recovery and resilience.



- **Emotional Expression:** Encourages healthy expression and processing of emotions.
- **Stress Tolerance:** Supports resilience in high-impact or crisis situations.
- **Reality Testing:** Helps maintain perspective during and after traumatic exposure.

Emotional Expression enables individuals to acknowledge and communicate their feelings in a healthy, constructive way. Rather than suppressing or internalising their emotional responses, emotionally intelligent individuals are better equipped to share their experiences, access support, and avoid emotional build-up that can lead to burnout or trauma-related symptoms. This is especially important in roles that expose people to suffering, violence, or grief.

Stress Tolerance strengthens emotional endurance and the capacity to stay composed under pressure. It supports a calm and measured response, both during and after traumatic events, and allows individuals to continue functioning while managing their emotional load. High stress tolerance is a key protective factor in crisis-exposed roles.

Reality Testing helps individuals maintain perspective and avoid being overwhelmed by emotional distortions or catastrophic thinking. It keeps them anchored in the facts, which is vital when dealing with emotionally intense or ambiguous events.

Together, these emotional intelligence capabilities support healthier processing, quicker recovery, and stronger psychological safety in trauma-exposed workplaces.

Leadership Derailers

Traumatic events place immense strain not only on workers directly involved but also on leaders who must support others while managing their own emotional reactions. When trauma is part of the job - as in emergency services, healthcare, social work, or content moderation - emotional intelligence becomes an essential skill. It acts as a protective factor for psychological safety, leadership effectiveness, and team wellbeing.

It is critical that a leader has the ability to support others through traumatic events or exposure to distressing content. Leaders with very **high Independence** but **lower Interpersonal Relationships** and **Empathy** may struggle to grasp the emotional impact such experiences have on their team. They may view emotional responses as unnecessary or overreactions, inadvertently invalidating others' feelings. Avoidance of emotional conversations can create a vacuum of support and leave team members feeling isolated.

Reading the emotional tone of situations is essential so leaders can develop appropriate and timely responses. Leaders who are **lower** in **Emotional Self-Awareness, Empathy, and Reality Testing** may misjudge the emotional needs of their team or react in ways that lack sensitivity. Their well-intentioned responses might come across as cold or dismissive, further compounding the emotional burden.

Leaders need to be able to manage their own reactions and emotional state in order to be able to recognise and assist their team with how they might be feeling. Understanding the different ways that people react to traumatic events and helping provide strategies to manage and cope is complex. By having a healthy level of emotional intelligence, leaders are better placed to assist.

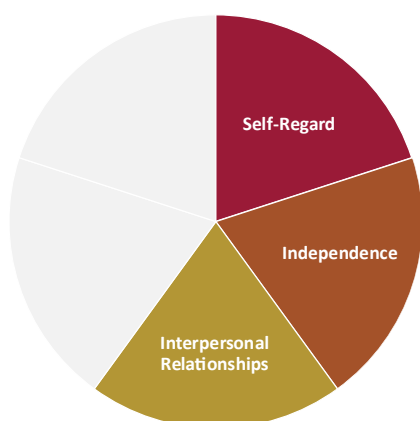
Remote or Isolated Work

Described as:

- Working in locations with long travel times, or where access to help, resources or communications is difficult or limited.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when they find remote or isolate work difficult.

Remote or isolated work environments can present unique emotional and psychological challenges. The lack of face-to-face interaction, limited real-time support, and potential feelings of disconnection can impact motivation, focus, and wellbeing. In such conditions, emotional intelligence competencies like **Interpersonal Relationships**, **Independence**, and **Self-Regard** play a crucial role in helping individuals maintain resilience and engagement.



- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Promotes proactive efforts to maintain connection.
- **Independence:** Builds comfort and confidence in working alone.
- **Self-Regard:** Supports emotional wellbeing when isolated from peer feedback.

Interpersonal Relationships supports the ability to build and sustain strong, mutually supportive connections—even across physical distance. Individuals with high emotional intelligence proactively maintain communication with colleagues, seek out social touchpoints, and contribute to team cohesion through virtual means. This not only reduces feelings of isolation but also strengthens collaboration and emotional support within dispersed teams.

Independence becomes especially important in remote work, where decision-making and task execution often occur without immediate guidance. Emotionally intelligent individuals are better equipped to trust their own judgment, manage their time effectively, and take initiative without relying heavily on constant feedback or supervision. This self-sufficiency fosters a sense of autonomy and accomplishment.

Self-Regard helps individuals maintain emotional stability and a positive self-image, even in the absence of external validation. When daily recognition or interaction is limited, a strong sense of self-worth reinforces motivation and psychological wellbeing.

Together, these competencies enable individuals to thrive in remote or isolated settings by supporting connection, confidence, and emotional resilience.

Leadership Derailers

Remote or isolated work introduces a unique blend of practical and emotional challenges - physical distance from others can easily morph into emotional disconnection, reduced psychological safety, and heightened stress. Leaders play a crucial role in bridging that gap, and emotional intelligence is central to how well they support remote or isolated workers, both in the moment and over time.

A leader who is **less adept** at building and sustaining **Interpersonal Relationships** and is highly self-reliant (**high Independence**) may not recognise the need for regular, meaningful connection and therefore may not initiate it. While they may function well independently themselves, assuming the same of others can result in team members feeling ignored, unsupported, or undervalued. This can increase disengagement, loneliness, and even presenteeism in remote environments.

If the leader also has **lower** scores in **Empathy** and **Reality Testing**, they may fail to notice emotional cues or misread the experience of their remote staff. Without tuning into how others are truly feeling or coping, they risk underestimating the psychosocial load of remote work, particularly for those dealing with home-life distractions, isolation, or blurred work-life boundaries. This limits their ability to intervene early or offer appropriate support.

Lower Emotional Expression or **Assertiveness** also weakens a leader's ability to create psychological connection. Without clear, timely, and emotionally attuned communication, expectations can be misunderstood, and trust can erode.

Checking in regularly - genuinely and intentionally - is not just good leadership practice, it's now a psychosocial imperative. Understanding each individual's preferred style of connection and feedback, and adapting accordingly, helps create a sense of inclusion and support that buffers against the risks of remote or isolated work. Emotional intelligence gives leaders the insight and flexibility needed to lead from afar, without losing connection.

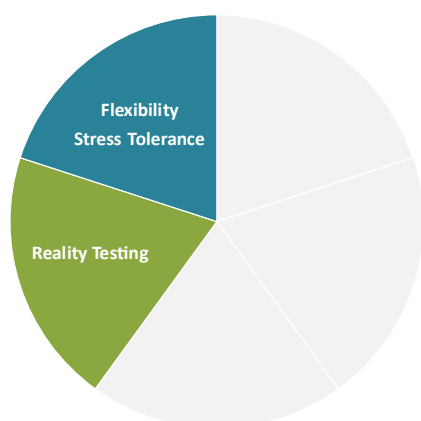
Poor Physical Environment

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Exposure to unpleasant or hazardous working environments.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there is a poor physical environment.

A poor physical work environment—whether due to inadequate lighting, extreme temperatures, noise, cramped spaces, or even safety hazards—can significantly affect employee wellbeing, focus, and morale. Over time, persistent discomfort or health risks can contribute to increased stress, decreased productivity, and higher turnover. In these conditions, emotional intelligence capabilities such as **Flexibility**, **Stress Tolerance**, and **Reality Testing** become key assets for navigating daily challenges while protecting psychological and emotional wellbeing.



- **Flexibility:** Aids in adapting to environmental discomfort.
- **Stress Tolerance:** Helps cope with suboptimal conditions without becoming overwhelmed.
- **Reality Testing:** Assists in distinguishing between temporary discomfort and genuine risk.

Flexibility allows individuals to adapt to less-than-ideal working conditions with a degree of acceptance and composure. Employees high in this trait are more likely to adjust their routines, mindset, or expectations in response to environmental discomfort, rather than becoming rigid or emotionally reactive. This ability to "roll with the punches" can help reduce frustration and maintain a positive outlook in the face of physical challenges that may not be immediately solvable.

Stress Tolerance supports individuals in maintaining emotional control when faced with ongoing environmental stressors. Whether it's excessive noise, a cluttered space, or temperature extremes, these stressors can easily wear down focus and patience. High stress tolerance enables people to manage their emotional responses effectively, reducing the risk of burnout or tension with colleagues. It also fosters greater resilience during periods of sustained exposure to suboptimal conditions.

Reality Testing offers the ability to assess the environment objectively, helping individuals distinguish between minor discomforts and legitimate health or safety risks. This clarity allows for appropriate and rational responses, such as raising concerns through the proper

channels or adjusting one's work methods. By avoiding catastrophising and staying grounded, emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to remain effective and level-headed, even when working in difficult physical environments.

Collectively, these emotional intelligence capabilities foster adaptability, resilience, and rational problem-solving - supporting employees to cope more effectively while advocating for necessary improvements.

Leadership Derailers

Poor physical environments create ongoing low-level stress, and in more extreme cases, real danger. Leaders may not always have direct control over environmental conditions but how they respond, advocate, and support workers is critical. Emotional intelligence helps leaders tune into the human experience of physically uncomfortable, distracting, or hazardous work and take proactive steps to reduce risk and protect wellbeing. Failing to do so not only has an impact on individual morale but may also breach legal obligations under psychosocial risk management frameworks.

A key derailer in these situations is **low Empathy**. Leaders who lack empathy may fail to recognise the emotional and physical toll of poor environments, dismissing worker concerns as complaints or exaggerations. This can erode trust and psychological safety, especially when workers feel ignored or invalidated.

Leaders with **high Independence, Problem Solving, and Reality Testing** may focus narrowly on achieving objectives, assuming others can cope as they do. While these are valuable traits, without balancing them with empathy and emotional insight, the result may be a culture that prizes performance over wellbeing.

Additionally, leaders who are **low in Flexibility** and overly reliant on **Impulse Control** may resist adapting routines or re-evaluating procedures, even when conditions clearly warrant change. This can increase the risk of error or injury and amplify worker frustration.

Ultimately, emotional intelligence helps leaders not only cope with poor physical environments but also advocate for systemic improvements. The goal is not just resilience—but resolution.

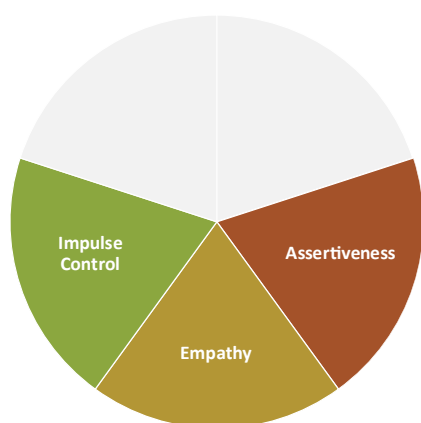
Violence and Aggression

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Violence, or threats of violence from other workers (including workers of other businesses), customers, patients or clients (including assault).
- Aggressive behaviour such as yelling or physical intimidation.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there is violence and aggression.

In environments where violence or aggression may occur—such as healthcare, corrections, customer service, or community-facing roles—emotional intelligence is not just beneficial; it is essential for safety and psychological resilience. EQ competencies like **Impulse Control**, **Assertiveness**, and **Empathy** help individuals and teams navigate high stress, emotionally charged situations with clarity and composure.



- **Impulse Control:** Helps workers manage their reactions to aggressive behaviour.
- **Assertiveness:** Supports setting boundaries calmly and firmly.
- **Empathy:** May assist in de-escalating volatile situations when safe to do so.

Impulse Control allows individuals to pause before reacting, a critical skill in moments of provocation. It supports calm decision-making under pressure and prevents reactive behaviour that might escalate aggression or create additional risk. People with high impulse control are more likely to defuse tension rather than fuel it.

Assertiveness equips individuals to communicate clear boundaries in a confident and respectful manner. In the face of verbal abuse, intimidation, or inappropriate behaviour, assertiveness helps employees protect themselves—verbally or physically—without resorting to aggression. It also enables them to raise concerns or seek help early, rather than tolerating unsafe interactions.

Empathy, when used judiciously, can support de-escalation by helping individuals interpret the emotional drivers behind aggressive behaviour. Recognising fear, frustration, or confusion in others may allow for more targeted, compassionate responses that reduce volatility.

In workplaces exposed to aggression, building these EQ capabilities enhances not only immediate safety, but also long-term emotional wellbeing. It empowers staff to manage

conflict constructively, recover more quickly from incidents, and maintain a sense of control and professionalism—even in unpredictable circumstances.

Leadership Derailers

Workplace violence and aggression are among the most serious psychosocial hazards, posing both physical and psychological threats to employees and requiring confident, emotionally attuned leadership. Leaders may need to manage their own emotional responses while also supporting others, ensuring safety, and responding to incidents appropriately. Emotional intelligence is key in creating a culture of safety, preventing escalation, and ensuring that responses are grounded in empathy, clarity, and action.

A number of subscale combinations might undermine a leader's ability to manage their emotional state. **Lower Emotional Self Awareness** with **lower Impulse Control** and **Stress Tolerance** creates the situation where the leader is less likely to be able to manage their emotional state in key moments.

Extremely high Assertiveness with **lower Empathy** and **Impulse Control** could have a leader be quick to tell others what they think before adjusting their communication to best suit the situation.

Other imbalances within a profile could result in a leader having empathy for the victim of violence or aggression, but struggling to take firm action against the perpetrator, leading to a lack of consequences and persistence of unsafe behaviours.

A **highly Independent** and **Flexible** leader with **lower Interpersonal Relationships** or **Empathy** may attempt to handle situations in isolation without following processes, consulting HR or WHS. This could negatively impact on how a situation is handled and have ongoing ramifications.

In all cases, it is important for a leader to be able to provide emotional support, understand the key process or procedure to follow, and manage their own emotional state. This requires all aspects of an emotional intelligence profile to be balanced.

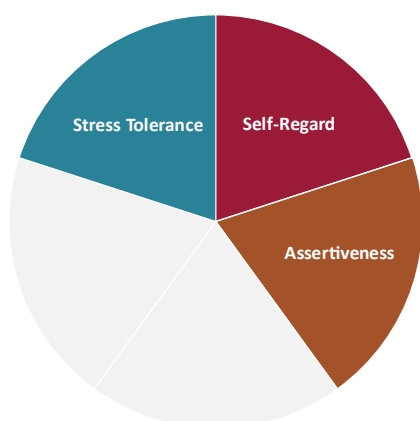
Bullying

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Repeated unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.⁴ This includes bullying by workers, clients, patients, visitors or others.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there is bullying.

Experiencing bullying behaviour can be distressing and have lasting effects. The emotional intelligence components of **Self-Regard**, **Assertiveness**, and **Stress Tolerance** can offer psychological support during such experiences. Self-Regard helps individuals maintain a positive self-image and hold onto a sense of self-worth in the face of harmful treatment. Assertiveness can provide the confidence to express needs or report the behaviour if and when they feel safe to do so. Stress Tolerance supports emotional resilience and coping throughout what can often be a challenging and ongoing process.



- **Self-Regard:** Protects self-worth in the face of demeaning behaviour.
- **Assertiveness:** Encourages speaking up or reporting bullying appropriately.
- **Stress Tolerance:** Supports coping mechanisms while the issue is being resolved.

Self-Regard helps individuals maintain a grounded sense of self-worth and confidence, even when they are being targeted or demeaned. This competency supports the belief that one deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, reducing the likelihood of internalising the bully's behaviour or developing self-doubt. It also fosters the inner strength needed to seek help or take protective action.

Assertiveness enables individuals to communicate boundaries and seek support, whether by speaking up directly or reporting behaviour through appropriate channels. In bullying situations, this may not always feel immediately safe, but developing assertiveness over time builds confidence to act when the conditions are right.

⁴ Bullying is defined in Safe Work Australia Guidance and the *Fair Work Act 2009 (Commonwealth)*.

Stress Tolerance plays a crucial role in helping individuals emotionally withstand ongoing bullying. It allows them to regulate anxiety, manage emotional triggers, and remain composed—even in toxic or hostile environments.

Together, these emotional intelligence skills contribute to psychological resilience, promote agency, and can help individuals feel less isolated and more empowered when facing bullying at work. They also lay the foundation for recovery and rebuilding confidence once the situation is resolved.

Leadership Derailers

Bullying is one of the most psychologically damaging workplace hazards, often leaving long-term impacts on individuals and teams. For leaders, it demands high emotional intelligence to detect subtle patterns, navigate conflict constructively, respond with both compassion and authority, and foster a safe, respectful culture. Since bullying often happens in quiet or indirect ways, leaders must be attuned to emotional undercurrents, not just visible incidents.

Some of the subscale combinations that might undermine a leader's ability to respond to cases of workplace Bullying are **high Independence** with **lower Interpersonal Relationships** or **Empathy**. They may struggle to understand the depth of response from others and potentially be dismissive at times.

Lower Emotional Self-Awareness and **lower Reality Testing** in combination can result in behaviour whereby a leader potentially misses the emotional tone of situations and responses may not be suitable in the moment.

Leaders who have a high need for approval or struggle with situations which they perceive as creating tension in relationships may shy away from having the required courageous conversations about unreasonable behaviour or tackling personal topics. They may sugar coat messages or listen with empathy but not take sufficient action.

Allowing the continued behaviour of bullying can have ongoing implications for people that

Harassment (Including Sexual Harassment)

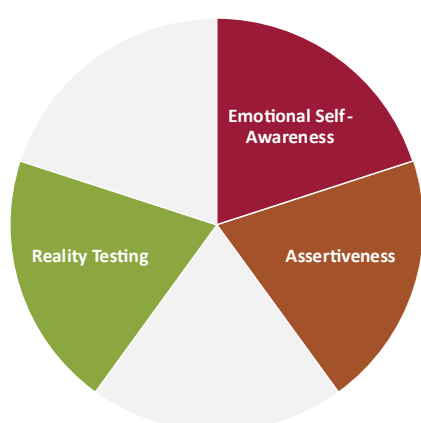
Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Harassment due to personal characteristics such as age, disability, race, nationality, religion, political affiliation, sex, relationship status, family or carer responsibilities, sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status.
- Sexual harassment - any unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, in circumstances where a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would anticipate the possibility that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated or intimidated.⁵
- Harmful behaviour that does not amount to bullying (such as single instances) but creates a risk to health or safety.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there is Harassment.

Recovering from experiences of harassment, including sexual harassment, can be an ongoing and deeply personal process. These incidents often leave individuals feeling unsafe, powerless, confused, or ashamed. The emotional aftermath may continue well beyond the event itself, impacting confidence, relationships, and performance at work. In these moments, emotional intelligence competencies offer not only psychological support but also a path toward empowerment and healing. **Emotional Self-Awareness** helps individuals acknowledge and understand their emotional responses, while **Assertiveness** can empower them to communicate needs, set boundaries, or report incidents when they feel ready.

Reality Testing supports individuals in affirming their experiences and resisting attempts to downplay or dismiss inappropriate behaviour.



- **Emotional Self-Awareness:** Identifies early signs of distress and emotional violation.
- **Assertiveness:** Empowers workers to express discomfort and report incidents.
- **Reality Testing:** Reinforces the validity of one's experience despite gaslighting or minimisation.

Emotional Self-Awareness plays a foundational role. It allows individuals to name and understand their emotional responses—whether those include fear, anger, shame, or numbness—rather than suppressing or ignoring them. Acknowledging these feelings is a crucial first step in processing the experience and accessing appropriate support.

⁵ Legal definitions of 'sexual harassment' may vary in each state and territory.

Assertiveness supports individuals in reclaiming their voice. When and if they feel ready, this capability can empower them to set clear boundaries, seek help from trusted allies, or formally report the behaviour. Assertiveness also allows individuals to advocate for their needs during recovery—for example, requesting changes to their work environment, seeking leave, or accessing counselling.

Reality Testing is vital in validating one's perception of the situation. Harassment often occurs in environments where victims are made to question their interpretation of events or where behaviour is minimised or excused. This competency helps individuals stay grounded in the facts, trust their judgment, and resist gaslighting or self-doubt.

Together, these emotional intelligence capabilities reinforce inner stability, restore confidence, and support a sense of agency. While EI alone does not solve the systemic and structural issues that allow harassment to occur, it provides individuals with the tools to navigate the emotional impact, access appropriate support, and begin to move forward. For organisations, fostering these capabilities across the workforce contributes to a culture where respect, safety, and accountability are non-negotiable.

Leadership Derailers

This is such a complex and sensitive area, and emotional intelligence can really make or break how leaders approach it. Harassment often manifests in ways that are invisible or minimised by those not directly affected, so it's important that leaders stay grounded in facts, examine biases, and avoid downplaying behaviours. Leaders must be willing to call out inappropriate behaviour, even if it's uncomfortable or unpopular, and take firm corrective action. They also need to recognise their own discomfort, defensiveness, or blind spots—especially if they've never experienced racism or harassment themselves.

Some of the subscale combinations that might undermine a leader's ability to respond to cases of workplace harassment are similar to those discussed for previous psychosocial hazards. As an example, **extremely high Independence** with **lower Interpersonal Relationships** and **Empathy** may result in leadership behaviour where they struggle to understand the depth of response from others and potentially be dismissive at times.

Lower Emotional Self-Awareness and **Reality Testing** in combination can result in the emotional tone of the situation being unacknowledged or misread resulting in responses that might be unsuitable.

Leaders with **lower Assertiveness** but **high Impulse Control** might wait too long to act in fear of saying the wrong thing. They may deliberate on the right approach or wording, missing the opportune moment to address the issue with the gravitas it requires.

Being such a sensitive area to address takes a high level of emotional intelligence, particularly the social sensitivities and capability.

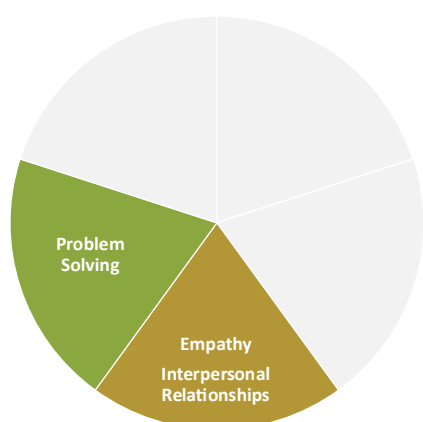
Conflict or Poor Workplace Relationships

Described by Safe Work Australia as:

- Poor workplace relationships or interpersonal conflict between colleagues or from other businesses, clients or customers.
- Frequent disagreements, disparaging or rude comments, either from one person or multiple people, such as from clients or customers. A worker can be both the subject and the source of this behaviour.
- Inappropriately excluding a worker from work-related activities.

Emotional Intelligence Capabilities that can help people in an organisation manage and cope when there is conflict or poor workplace relationships.

In workplaces characterised by interpersonal tension, miscommunication, or ongoing conflict, emotional intelligence becomes a vital tool for restoring trust and promoting effective collaboration. Persistent conflict not only affects productivity but can also erode psychological safety, increase stress, and lead to disengagement. EQ competencies such as **Interpersonal Relationships**, **Empathy**, and **Problem Solving** are instrumental in navigating these challenges with emotional maturity and professionalism.



- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Builds bridges and improves communication.
- **Empathy:** Supports understanding other perspectives in conflict resolution.
- **Problem Solving:** Facilitates constructive approaches to resolving disagreements.

Interpersonal Relationships involves the ability to build and maintain mutually satisfying connections. This competency supports individuals in creating open channels of communication, fostering trust, and demonstrating genuine interest in others. In conflict situations, strong interpersonal skills can de-escalate tension by creating a more respectful and collaborative tone, allowing space for honest dialogue and shared problem solving.

Empathy is key to understanding the emotions and perspectives of others, even when they differ from our own. It helps individuals listen without judgment, acknowledge feelings, and respond in ways that affirm others' experiences. In conflict, empathy can soften defensiveness and reduce blame by encouraging more human, compassionate conversations.

Problem Solving, as defined by the EQ-i 2.0, refers to the ability to work through problems effectively while managing emotions. In emotionally charged situations, this competency helps individuals remain solution-focused rather than becoming reactive or entrenched in conflict. It promotes rational thinking, constructive communication, and compromise—all critical to conflict resolution.

Together, these emotional intelligence capabilities create a framework for healthy relationship repair, enabling individuals and teams to move through conflict with greater self-awareness, respect, and resilience. When nurtured across a team or organisation, they contribute to a culture where differences are navigated—not avoided—and workplace relationships are strengthened through trust, empathy, and mutual accountability.

Leadership Derailers

Conflict or Poor Workplace Relationships can arise when disrespectful behaviours are tolerated, expectations for conduct are unclear, or when other psychosocial stressors (such as high workload or low support) amplify tensions. Leaders play a key role in shaping the relational environment, and their capacity to manage emotions, communicate constructively, and foster respectful interactions is essential in preventing and resolving interpersonal issues before they escalate.

Leaders may not be as adept at managing these situations if their **Empathy** is **lower** and they have **high Independence**. This is a pattern which shows up regularly as a derailer as it has them being less able to understand the extent to which someone may be experiencing the psychosocial hazard and as such, their response may not be commensurate with the individual's feelings.

The imbalance between **Assertiveness** and **Empathy** whereby the leader has a higher need for approval or shies away from conversations that they feel may damage relationships means they may not call out the poor behaviour when required. They may not respond adequately to acknowledge and resolve the conflict.

In other situations, we may find leaders who prioritise being “right” over having relationships. Limited capacity to connect with others can have serious implications for conflict resolution and for the timely recognition and cessation of disrespectful behaviours.

Conclusion

The Critical Role of Emotionally Intelligent Leadership in Preventing Psychosocial Hazards

As Australia's workplace legislation continues to evolve in response to psychosocial risk, organisations must rise to the challenge of not only identifying hazards but embedding systemic responses that protect wellbeing. Central to this evolution is a leadership approach that recognises the human element at the core of every workplace experience. Emotional intelligence - particularly as measured through the EQ-i 2.0 framework - offers a practical, evidence-based roadmap for equipping leaders with the behavioural capabilities they need to create safer, more supportive environments.

Across the psychosocial hazards identified in Safe Work Australia's *Model Code of Practice*, a common thread emerges - hazards are less likely to flourish in environments where leaders are attuned to the emotional and interpersonal needs of their teams. High workload, low control, poor relationships, and even trauma are not solely technical or procedural challenges, they are also emotional ones. They require leaders to manage both their own internal state and the external emotional climate of their teams. Without this awareness and agility, leaders may inadvertently normalise stress, overlook signs of distress, or reinforce toxic patterns.

The findings in this white paper highlight that emotionally intelligent leadership is not a luxury, it is a protective mechanism. When emotional intelligence is integrated into leadership development, risk management, and cultural frameworks, organisations are far more capable of identifying early warning signs, intervening proactively, and sustaining a climate of psychological safety.

Which Emotional Intelligence Capabilities Matter Most?

While every EQ-i 2.0 subscale has relevance in a leadership context, certain capabilities emerge as consistently critical in the prevention of psychosocial hazards:

- **Emotional Self-Awareness:** This foundational skill enables leaders to accurately identify and regulate their own emotional responses. Without it, stress and frustration can leak into interactions and colour decisions. Leaders who lack self-awareness may overlook the emotional tone of the workplace or misread the needs of others - particularly during high-pressure periods, change, or conflict.
- **Empathy:** Perhaps the most repeated and relied-upon competency across all hazards, empathy enables leaders to tune in to the experiences of their people. It is critical in recognising distress signals, responding appropriately to sensitive situations such as harassment or trauma, and building trust across diverse and multigenerational teams.
- **Reality Testing:** In psychologically unsafe environments, distorted thinking often takes hold, whether it's catastrophising, blame-shifting, or denial. Reality Testing allows leaders to stay grounded, see situations clearly, and challenge their own

assumptions. It is especially valuable during periods of change, when uncertainty can erode morale and clarity is needed most.

- **Assertiveness:** The ability to communicate thoughts, feelings, and decisions confidently and respectfully is essential when addressing performance concerns, providing feedback, or setting boundaries. Assertiveness helps leaders intervene early, before poor behaviour escalates or psychological harm occurs. It also enables victims of workplace misconduct to feel heard and supported.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Leaders who cultivate strong interpersonal bonds foster environments of mutual trust and support. This becomes especially important when individuals are working in isolation, feel undervalued, or are navigating interpersonal conflict. High relational competence also improves a leader's ability to de-escalate conflict and bring fractured teams together.
- **Stress Tolerance:** Modern workplaces are volatile by nature, and leaders who can maintain composure under sustained pressure are better positioned to protect their teams from becoming collateral damage. Importantly, stress tolerance must be balanced with empathy, otherwise, resilient leaders may assume others can (or should) cope in the same way, unintentionally reinforcing harmful expectations.
- **Flexibility:** Leaders need to be adaptable, not just in terms of strategy or systems, but in how they relate to people. Emotional flexibility allows them to adjust their leadership style based on individual needs, environmental changes, or evolving team dynamics. It also prevents rigidity in policies and behaviours, which can aggravate hazards such as poor support or low autonomy.

Taken together, these subscales represent the emotional infrastructure required for leadership that protects people - not just from burnout, but from exclusion, disrespect, injustice, and harm.

From Personal Capability to Systemic Change

Embedding emotional intelligence into your leadership framework does more than develop individuals, it shifts the broader culture. When leaders model emotionally intelligent behaviours, they influence the norms, expectations, and emotional climate of their teams. Employees learn that their wellbeing matters, that respectful conversations are the standard, and that psychological safety is not just the responsibility of HR or compliance, but something owned by every person in a position of influence.

However, emotional intelligence development cannot rely solely on one-off training or self-reflection. It must be supported by systems, feedback loops, and accountability. This is where tools like the EQ-i 2.0 and EQ 360 become powerful. Not only do they offer insight into an individual's current capabilities, but they also reveal patterns, blind spots, and areas for targeted development. Organisations that train internal leaders and coaches to use these tools gain the ability to sustain emotional intelligence development over time and apply it directly to psychosocial risk contexts.

Leadership Development as Risk Mitigation

In a traditional WHS context, risk is often seen through the lens of compliance, audits, and procedural controls. While these are necessary, they are not sufficient. Psychosocial risk requires a parallel focus on behavioural and relational dynamics. In other words, it requires emotionally intelligent leadership.

Leaders are not just task managers or strategic planners, they are emotional influencers. Every conversation, decision, and gesture either contributes to, or detracts from psychological safety. Developing emotional intelligence provides leaders with the insight, language, and presence to lead in a way that buffers against psychosocial harm and builds resilience into the fabric of the team.

Whether it's preventing burnout through early intervention, reducing isolation by fostering connection, or building fairness into decision-making processes, emotional intelligence is a leadership capability with direct safety outcomes.

The Path Forward

The next step is to take action. HR, People & Culture, and WHS leaders are well-positioned to drive this integration. By embedding EQ-i 2.0 assessments into leadership development pathways, aligning emotional intelligence frameworks with psychosocial risk strategies, and using emotional intelligence language in coaching, debriefing, and performance conversations, organisations can close the gap between insight and behaviour.

Importantly, the goal is not to develop perfect leaders, but self-aware ones. Leaders who are willing to reflect on how they show up, engage in difficult conversations, and grow through feedback will always have a greater impact than those who rely on positional power or procedural authority alone.

In closing, emotionally intelligent leadership is about being effective, especially in emotionally complex environments. The link between emotional intelligence and psychosocial safety is clear, compelling, and actionable. By developing emotionally intelligent leaders, organisations invest in healthier people, more connected teams, and workplaces where psychosocial hazards are not allowed to take root.