



# The importance of emotional intelligence for tennis coaches.

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to introduce readers to the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and how it may apply to the field of tennis coaching. Recent research will be reviewed that illustrates how EI, within a coaching context, may hold more consequence for career satisfaction and success in comparison to other theories of intelligence such as IQ.

**Key words:** Career success, Emotional intelligence, IQ

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## INTRODUCTION

The emotional intelligence concept experienced a rapid growth in the 1990's. Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined EI as: "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (p. 10). In layman's terms, EI refers to a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Goleman (1995) also outlined other important facets, including EI as the ability persist in the face of frustrations, to control impulses, to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think logically.

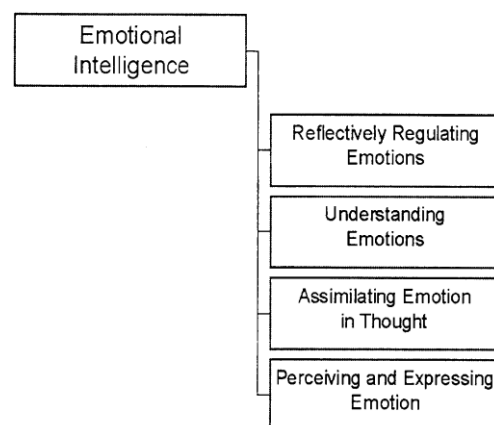
## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND CAREER SUCCESS RESEARCH

Research has also shown that academic achievement, occupational success and satisfaction, and emotional health and adjustment are related to EI (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Research by Goleman, (1995) posited that EI inclined to result in better team work skills in business settings as a result of increased communication skills. There is also evidence to suggest that increased EI leads to more positive attitudes, improved relationships, higher orientation towards positive values and greater adaptability (Akerjordet & Severinsson 2007). Studies investigating EI in athletes and sport are limited (Meyer & Fletcher 2007; Meyer & Zizzi, 2007) however tentative links have been shown to exist between athletic performance

and EI (Zizzi et al., 2003). Whilst this research does not relate directly to coaching contexts, positive attitudes, improved relationships, communication and performance are arguably important attributes for successful coaching.

[Emotional Intelligence- a definition \(Mayer & Salovey, 1993, 1997\)](#)

The present article will the ability model of EI and its possible contribution and importance in the field of sport, specifically tennis coaching.



**Figure 1. A four layer model of the skills involved in EI. From Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000).**

The overall model of EI can be broken down into four hierarchical classes of abilities that together encompass EI as

an intelligence or ability. See figure 1. (Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2000).

The lowest level skills within the above model involve the perception and appraisal of emotion. An example of this in a coaching setting might involve perceiving when a player is experiencing certain emotions on court. A coach displaying this aspect of emotional intelligence would be better able to pick up on important cues from facial expressions or perhaps body language and recognise what they might mean.

The next level up within the model involves assimilating basic emotional experiences into mental life, including weighing emotions against one another and against other sensations and thoughts, and reflects an ability to use emotions to facilitate cognition (Stanimirovic & Hanrahan, 2010). At this level, characteristics include holding an emotional state in consciousness long enough to compare its correspondences to similar sensations in sound, colour, and taste (Mayer, Caruso and Salovey, 2000). In a coaching setting, recognition that a player seems frustrated or upset may lead to the coach to recognise and consider the importance of adapting the session e.g. making alterations of intensity for more enjoyment. Here the coach would be demonstrating the understanding that from an emotional perspective, a stressful and intense training session may prove to be sub-optimal in this situation.



The third level within the model involves understanding emotions and how they play out in real life situations, and thus reasoning about emotions based on that implicit knowledge. An individual that displays this ability is able to understand emotions and likely subsequent emotions and more often than not, the likely ensuing behavioural responses. Essentially, a coach with this ability can recognise that emotions will play out in different ways to others; anger, frustration and elation for example follow their own specific conventional paths. Anger rises when justice is denied. For example, a player who just

came off court after being cheated out of a match will understandably follow an emotional process that the coach must recognise and react accordingly to. Similarly, a player having lost a tight but fair match will be likely to show frustration. In both these examples, a coach or even a parent must allow the player to have space and time to calm down and cool off emotionally- with only minimal input in terms of advice or feedback. Immediately after the match is not the time to start feeding your player with advice, or even worse, rebuking them for not dealing with certain situations as you would have hoped. In these difficult situations, coaches (and often parents too) who are not cognisant and understanding of the players emotions may not realise the detrimental effects of immediately reviewing and analysing the match with the player, this is the last thing they want to talk about at that moment! Coaching behaviours such as these are unfortunately more common, and often may lead to a strain in the coach-athlete relationship which can be easily ameliorated.



The fourth and most complex level within Mayer and Salovey's model involves the management and regulation of emotion, such as knowing how to calm down after feeling angry or being able to alleviate the anxiety of another person. This level of the model encompasses all the levels below it. Each skill is related to one another resulting in the individual managing their own and others' emotions as well as regulating and behaving in a way that will result in optimal functioning for both player and coach, and sometimes even parents where applicable. A relevant working example is drawn from dealing with parents to explain this level of the model. Many coaches have dealt with challenging parents, who understandably have a vested interest in their child's development which is reflected in a high level of parental engagement in all areas. Management and regulation of emotion is a key skill that can be tested when working closely with parents. Understanding, and sometimes managing their frustrations as well as your own, is a good representation of the fourth level of emotional intelligence. Here the coach must perceive accurately the parent's emotions, understanding how they are likely to react. Simultaneously,

(and sometimes in the heat of a situation) the coach must also recognise and regulate how they react themselves. Perception, understanding, reaction and management of emotions are important skills that summarise the higher order level within the EI model.



#### HOW CAN EI BE IMPROVED? PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

As mentioned earlier, the ability model of EI suggests that it is a skill that can improve over time (Diehl, 2010; Mayer, Caruso and Salovey 2000). This suggestion is encouraging when compared with other aspects of intelligence, which have been suggested to remain more constant and unchanging throughout the lifespan. The following paragraph will now look at some practical ways in which the reader can begin to a) develop awareness of their level of EI and b) seek to improve on that level.

#### SWOT analysis

The first step to improving any skill lies in outlining what your strengths are, and also identifying areas where you can improve. A SWOT analysis involves a full disclosure of strengths, weaknesses and/or threats to achieving a set goal. Write down a list of strengths that you feel will help you when found in a challenging situation to regulate and behave in the best possible manner. It is also important to outline what traits may make it difficult for you e.g. short temper.

#### Journal Logging

Keep a written record of significant events that occur in your coaching work. For example, a dispute with a tournament official or a situation where a parent made a complaint against you. Record how you reacted in that situation, then revisit your written record at a later time and review what you could have done to improve your reactions in a given situation.

#### Acceptance and tolerance

More often than not, the challenges to maintain and regulate emotions will come from frustration, anger or perhaps disappointment. Try to become more accepting in frustrating circumstances, as opposed to demanding perfect scenarios at all times. By becoming more accepting, frustration levels in given situations will be reduced- the result being that you bypass many challenging emotional situations simply by adopting a different perspective. It is important to note however, that increasing your level of tolerance does not equate to a lowering of standards. As a coach, higher levels of acceptance does not mean dropping discipline levels, or allowing for inconsistent or inappropriate behaviour from you, your colleagues or your players.

#### Patience

When situations do arise that challenge your ability to keep calm or regulate emotion, employ the old wisdom of 'counting to ten'. Allowing your body to experience the emotion before acting will make it easier to think clearly.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The body of literature discussed has outlined how EI can have positive implications for personal, social, academic and work place success (Brackett, Rivers & Salovey, 2011). The tennis coaching context is certainly no exception when considering the importance of EI in day to day scenarios. Indeed, it may be feasible to suggest that EI can play an important and even critical role in relations with parents, players, fellow colleagues, officials and referees.

In addition to this, on a day to day basis, EI may contribute positively to the coach athlete relationship, and thus indirectly impact retention of players, as well as successful long term player development. Research has begun to investigate coaching behaviours and EI (Thelwell, Lane Weston & Greenlees, 2008) however it is hoped that future research within coaching contexts is conducted, so that the aforementioned variables may be tested empirically. Practically speaking, coaches should consider their EI as an important part of professional development, and adopt one or a number of the above recommendations.

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