

## Using Emotional Intelligence to Influence

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

One of the greatest challenges for leaders is learning how to influence without formal authority. There are many ways to achieve this, but one of the most important ways is to harness the skills associated with being emotionally intelligent. [An article by Goleman and Boyatzis, published in Harvard Business Review](#), identifies several dimensions for gaining insight into your personal emotional intelligence (EI). I've adapted five of the dimensions to the challenges we're facing during COVID-19.

1. **Empathy** — Our capacity to understand and accept where people are coming from — and valuing this orientation as we do work together — provides a context for sharing common ground. It also helps define what we will work on and how to go about it. With the crisis produced by the pandemic, empathy is all the more essential as our co-workers face it from multiple, different perspectives, and each of these needs to be honored and understood before we can develop a way of working together.
2. **Attunement** — This is the way in which we focus and engage with others. Empathy implies an openness to learn. Attunement is the learning. Leaders who are truly attuned can focus on the other and push through their own thoughts and emotions even if they threaten to color or misinterpret the understanding of their position and experience. This acceptance is essential as we adapt our work to represent collective interests. Attunement also has an active dimension that can adjust our understanding as moods and climate change.
3. **Situational Awareness** — This is the collective or organizational equivalent of empathy for the individual. To be influential, leaders must be able to understand the bigger picture of the organization, including its vision, strategy, and culture. The influential leader must also understand the internal dynamics and politics of the organization. Within the larger organization there will be multiple sub-cultures with their own norms, patterns, and preferences. Successful influencers understand and value these differences and can use this understanding in their efforts to move forward. The action component of situational awareness takes the leader from understanding to actually changing their own strategy, priorities, and style as the sands shift. In this current crisis, each part of the organization is likely to be activated in different ways —

### About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit [www.chcs.org/quicktakes](http://www.chcs.org/quicktakes).

the influential leader adapts to this.

- 4. Alignment** — This is the gold standard test of influence. If there is no alignment around shared goals and work, then the influencer has failed. This dimension builds on the first three dimensions detailed above, but includes a very active engagement with the desired future state, real time politics, and needs of individuals. Successful alignment requires the leader wielding influence to be an effective negotiator, conflict manager, decision maker, and perhaps most important, communicator. Today's crisis response demands a focus on the immediate challenges and a deft capacity to pivot to the middle and longer term once there is a better understanding of how the world will have actually changed.
- 5. Inspiration** — This final capacity challenges the influencer to give heart to the individual and organization to stay engaged with the shared work. In this role, the influencer provides a positive sense of direction toward the shared goal and can relate this vision to the broader societal and environmental developments. The influencer must also give the compelling rationale that the strategies that are being pursued are the ones that will produce organizational and individual success in a world that is more complicated and less familiar than what has gone before. Today, this is the biggest challenge to the leader who wants to influence.

Influence is needed in our health care organizations now more than ever because many of the sense-making constructs that have guided us in the past have been damaged, altered, or simply will never exist again in the same form.

## About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit [www.oneil-and-associates.com](http://www.oneil-and-associates.com).

## About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

The National Association of Medicaid Directors supports Medicaid directors in administering the program in cost-effective, efficient, and visionary ways that enable the over 70 million Americans served by Medicaid to achieve their best health and to thrive in their communities. To learn more, visit [www.medicaiddirectors.org](http://www.medicaiddirectors.org).

## About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. To learn more, visit [www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders](http://www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders).