



***Emotional intelligence and team  
performance lessons for project  
management researchers: A critical  
review***

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**Keywords:**

Project management,  
emotional intelligence,  
team, manager, job  
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**Idea:**

Imagine a football team that consists of skillful players with positive personalities. However, they are managed by an insecure manager who does not know what he is doing. Will they win the cup?

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***Introduction***

The work conducted by Sy, et al. (2006) on emotional intelligence in the context of a restaurant business is a very interesting piece since it talks not only about the restaurant managers' emotional intelligence (EI), but also about their employees' EI. Most of the articles in this subject tend to ignore the employees' EI (e.g. Clarke, 2009, Sunindijo, Hadikusumo, & Ogunlana, 2007, and Leban & Zulauf, 2004). What makes the article more interesting is the fact that Sy, et al. (2006) analyze the relationship between the employees' EI, their managers' EI, the employees' job satisfaction and performance. Therefore, it does not only discover new things in the theory of EI, but it also connects them.

This paper argues that the findings and limitations in the "restaurant" research conducted by Sy, et al. (2006) provides an important EI lesson for project management researchers. The author then suggests a new approach to measure the effect of emotional intelligence on team performance, and how this "new approach" might change the direction of future research in this subject. As to the

question proposed earlier in the text, this paper provides insights on what the correct answer would be based on the lessons learned.

### ***Emotional intelligence, job satisfaction and performance in the context of a restaurant business***

There are three main findings proposed by the Sy, et al., 2006. First, their findings suggest that employees with higher EI tend to have more satisfaction in doing their job (i.e. both their own and their group's job satisfaction). Second, they suggest that restaurant employees with higher EI perform better in their job. This supports Goleman's theory that EI affects job performance (Goleman, 1996). Finally, the findings also suggest that employees with lower EI are more dependent to managers with higher EI in terms of enhancing their job performance. Employees with higher EI tends to be independent regardless of the managers' EI since they are better in appraising and managing their own emotions that lead to more confidence, control, innovation, resilience, and cooperation which results in better job performance. Sy, et al. (2006), however, *do not consider the influence of employees with higher EI to the performance of other employees (i.e. their peers) with lower EI.*

### ***Lessons for project management researchers***

Although Sy, et al. (2006) did not conduct their research in a project management context, the findings of their research is even more important for project success because 'projects are emotional' (Clarke, 2010) in a way that many decisions in projects influenced by emotions. Project management requires the ability of making new relationships, building trust swiftly, and adapting to change in projects temporary and changing nature (Druskat & Druskat, 2006). These are the types of 'emotional labor' in which EI is required more (Wong & Law, 2002).

The fact that project managers' EI has a significant role in project success (Lewis, 2010) does not mean that their their team members' EI should be ignored. In the restaurant business (Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006), one of the learning points is that employees with higher EI can still produce stable performance regardless of their managers' EI. Another possible learning point, which is not analyzed by Sy, et al. (2006), is how employees with higher EI influence their colleagues' performance. In project management, the lessons should also be learned. Teams could perform well despite their managers' low EI level, and the effect of project team members' EI on their colleagues' performance should also be considered.

### ***Conclusion and Implications***

Learning from a research in the restaurant business context, this paper suggests a different approach to

assess the effect of emotional intelligence on project team performance. Instead of merely assessing how project managers' emotional intelligence affects their team performance, researchers should focus more on studying how project teams can still perform well regardless of their manager's emotional intelligence level. Furthermore, researchers should analyze how team members' emotional intelligence affects the performance of their peers. This requires a shift from a "manager-centric" towards a "team-centric" research.

In the same tone, this paper suggests that project management practitioners should be more careful in assessing team performance in their projects. Project success does not necessarily mean a strong managerial performance. Instead, it could mean a solid performance by a team managed by an "insecure coach".

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