

THE EMOTIONAL TOOLBOX FOR LEADERSHIP: BUILDING CADETS' SELF-AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Sofia Menezes, Military Academy, sofia.menezes@academiamilitar.pt

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ABSTRACT

Mental well-being is often overlooked despite rising emotional distress worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated burnout, depleting emotional resilience. Research shows a decline in emotional intelligence (EQ) across working generations over the past four years, with Generation Z and Millennials most affected. Emotional hygiene is essential, requiring early integration into personal and professional development. Military cadets must develop emotional intelligence skills to enhance leadership, self-awareness, and resilience. This study, part of a sabbatical leave project, aimed to equip cadets with practical, emotional intelligence tools to strengthen interpersonal and leadership skills. Students from diverse military backgrounds participated in an intensive emotional intelligence and leadership training program. There were 57 feedback replies assessing the program's impact on self-awareness and communication skills and 43 answers to the two-phase questionnaire used during the project. Results showed increased emotional intelligence skills awareness among students. Participants recommended making such training mandatory in military curricula. Integrating emotional intelligence into leadership education can enhance cadets' ability to navigate complex environments, fostering resilient and empathetic leaders.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Development, Military Training, Cross-Cultural Awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the title Emotional Toolbox for Leadership may initially look abstract, its meaning is deeply embedded in our daily interactions at several levels, namely within military, academic, or leadership-oriented environments. The subtitle Building Cadet Resilience and Cultural Awareness defines the study's target group and two characteristics that can be seen as challenging for today's I-oriented generations.

This paper reflects on how Emotional Intelligence (EI) and its skills can bridge the gap between the individual and the Other and how the metaphor of an emotional toolbox can be used as both a communication tool and a healing mechanism for emotional and social wounds. That is to say, for non-resolved situations, for example. According to Goleman (1998), a successful leader is composed of three main percentages: 25% Intelligence Quotient, another 25% technical knowledge, and the other 50% belonging to the Emotional Quotient (EQ). This significant percentage centred on the Emotional intelligence skills use is primarily born from neurotransmitters in the brain's limbic system, which controls emotions, impulses and drives.

As for the emotional toolbox, Tony Attwood, a renowned clinical psychologist specializing in autism spectrum disorders, describes it as a different type of tool that will help people of all ages with emotional and social understanding (Attwood, 2004). The concept of an emotional toolbox is often employed in therapeutic, educational, and personal development contexts to help individuals cope with emotional challenges and enhance their emotional well-being. It also draws inspiration from the emotional first-aid kit thought by psychologist Guy Winch, who advocates for emotional healing to be taken as seriously as physical healing. Winch advocates that communication injuries—such as unresolved conflicts, misinterpretations, or emotional suppression—often leave wounds that are less visible but equally impactful; for that reason, we need to heal those wounds.

Taking Winch's theory into account and based on Goleman's theories on the five components of emotional intelligence, we believe that the core components of the Toolbox of Emotions must be Empathy, Social Skills, Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, and Motivation. These elements can be trained, maintained, and used as "remedies" in interpersonal situations. A leader equipped with this Emotional Toolbox is capable of guiding others and recognizing and responding to emotional cues within him/herself and their team.

We begin by contextualizing global emotional well-being, narrowing our focus to the downsides and decrease of emotional intelligence levels and focusing on the most affected generations, Millennials and Generation Z. Next; we present the pilot project training initiative designed to enhance communication and emotional intelligence skills among military academy students: Emotional Intelligence Skills Training for Better Communication, our proposed emotional toolbox. We then reflect on the metaphorical and functional aspects of the emotional toolbox to improve leadership skills and conclude with implications for personal growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 EMOTIONAL TOOLBOX CONCEPT

In educational settings, the emotional toolbox concept is adapted to assist children in recognizing and managing their emotions. Later in the educational path, Loughran (Loughran, J., 2020) argues that emotional intelligence is crucial for leaders to navigate the challenges of their roles, particularly in environments where academic values may conflict with corporate demands. The Military Academies are good examples of this kind of environment.

In this paper, the term emotional toolbox refers to a collection of strategies, techniques, or resources cadets can utilize to manage and regulate their emotions and actions

effectively. To be able to be and feel more emotionally efficient, therefore more empathetic and building better and stronger connections with the Other, and the team, in terms of work environment. In summary, the emotional toolbox is a metaphorical and practical framework that empowers individuals to proactively manage their emotional health by equipping them with personalized emotional intelligence skills tools and strategies.

Six Seconds, a global non-profit organization dedicated to advancing and disseminating Emotional Intelligence (EI), has conducted a “State of the Heart” study across more than 169 countries and 227,610 participants over the past 13 years. Their findings point to a global emotional recession, with key indicators of EI declining steadily—an effect exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of AI and decreased face-to-face interaction. The data underscore a stark reality: humanity is struggling with diminished emotional literacy at a time when it is most needed. For the past four years, global emotional intelligence has decreased by 5.54% (Six Seconds, 2024).

When reporting, these findings are backed by Sutin et al. (2022) that personality traits such as extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—integral to EI—have declined at a pace that usually spans a decade, now compressed into just two years. According to Joshua Freedman (2023), we are experiencing a global decline in emotional intelligence, paving the way for disseminating issues such as disconnection, isolation, and burnout. These declines directly influence communication, collaboration, and leadership success, highlighting an urgent need to re-centre emotional intelligence in educational and organizational systems.

Research by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence echoes this concern. Their studies indicate a steep rise in feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and emotional fatigue among the global population, particularly during and after the pandemic. Marc

Brackett, founding director of the centre, notes that when we fail to recognize and regulate our emotions, they control our behaviours in ways that do not serve us or others (Brackett, 2019). These patterns reflect a critical erosion in the emotional infrastructure necessary for both personal well-being and social cohesion.

Also, The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy, working with over 100 countries, has similar results on its Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) 2023. This survey collected data from youngsters between 10 and 15 years of age and, among other findings, showed that students reported lower levels of most social and emotional skills in 2023 than in 2019, and students with lower emotional regulation skills (particularly optimism), energy and trust tend to report poorer well-being outcomes, including lower life satisfaction and psychological well-being.

People are tired, burned out, and too often, not thriving. According to a Gallup annual study of employees in over 160 countries and areas, seven in 10 people globally report struggling or suffering. People are lonely and isolated (Gallup, 2025). It is necessary to reverse the recession trend on emotional and social skills. Especially as it is mainly happening among younger generations: the students from any high school, who then transfer to universities, to military academies, and become the people in charge, the future leaders.

2.2 EMOTIONAL RECESSION AMONG YOUTH

Generations Z (born 1995–2012) and Millennials (born 1981–1996) appear to be the most affected by this downturn in emotional competencies. As they enter or advance within the workforce, their reduced levels of EI—combined with heightened susceptibility to stress and burnout—pose significant risks, not only for individual

mental health but also for organizational resilience and the future of leadership. According to the American Psychological Association's 2023 Stress in America report, Gen Z adults are the most likely of any generation to report poor mental health, high-stress levels, and a lack of emotional support (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Jean Twenge, author of *iGen* and *Generations*, attributes much of this shift to the rise of digital communication and social media, when youngsters do not interact face-to-face but merely on screens, eroding the development of empathy and emotional nuance (Twenge, 2017). These concerns are also reflected in recent workplace studies by Deloitte and Gallup (2025), which show that young professionals crave emotionally intelligent leadership, yet often find it lacking.

Training and support tailored specifically for these demographics is crucial. Incorporating emotional literacy into formal curricula, integrating it into extracurricular initiatives, or embedding it in mentorship programs can foster the growth of key EI competencies—such as self-awareness, emotion regulation, and empathetic leadership. As Susan David, psychologist and author of *Emotional Agility*, asserts, “Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.” (David, 2016) Teaching younger generations how to navigate that discomfort with emotional skills can set the foundation for healthier individuals and more emotionally intelligent organizations. People change behaviours when motivated to do so...but how does one share knowledge and experience with somebody who sees the world differently? How does one inspire performance without formal authority? Emotional Intelligence skills training is one of the ways. The various components of emotional intelligence help achieve successful interpersonal relationships, supporting some abilities, such as listening, cooperating, asking for help, joining teams or negotiating conflicts (Denham, 2007). Emotionally intelligent youngsters will become better human beings and can

become better leaders. In the words of Mayer (Mayer et al., 2004), effective emotional leadership requires self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management to lead others effectively, and these skills and the ability to use them effectively need training.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

As part of a sabbatical leave project, from October 2022 to June 2023, a pilot initiative titled Emotional Intelligence Skills Training for Better Communication was developed at the Portuguese Military Academy and implemented across five European Basic Officer Education Institutions (BOEI): the Portuguese Military Academy (Portugal), the General Military Academy (Spain), the University of Turin (Italy), the National Defense Academy of Latvia, and the Rakovski National Defence College (Bulgaria). The project aimed to identify and strengthen underutilized communication and emotional skills among cadets, transforming them into practical leadership tools.

A total of 103 students participated: 22 cadets were part of the group of control and were asked to complete the two-phase questionnaire; 81 students were also asked to complete the two-phase questionnaire and participated in all sessions, with training conducted in groups of up to 20 students per institution.

The following students took part in the entire project: 22 Portuguese students (5 women and 17 men); 17 Spanish students (5 women and 12 men); 11 Italian students (1 woman and 10 men); 20 Latvian students (2 women and 18 men); and one male American student (included in the group of students from National Defense Academy of Latvia); 10 Bulgarian students (3 women, six men, 1 preferred not to say); totaling 81 students who took part in the four modules (table 1).

Table 1

Sample distribution

Institution	Country	Participants	Session Format
Portuguese Military Academy	Portugal	22	In-person
General Military Academy	Spain	17	Hybrid
University of Turin	Italy	11	Online
National Defense Academy of Latvia	Latvia	21	In-Person
Rakovski National Defence College	Bulgaria	10	Online
Total		81	Varied (mostly in-person)

Each group engaged in a four-session program over a month or within the time frame of a week (depending on the institution), with 90-minute sessions. This structure allowed students time to reflect on the concepts learned, and the intention was that they should apply the concepts progressively. The curriculum consisted of four core modules:

Non-verbal communication – “The Walk That Talks”: Focused on increasing awareness of body language, its perception and interpretation and how it can affect all kinds of relationships and daily connections and activities; Emotional Literacy – “Are Words Gone with the Wind?”: Aimed at expanding emotional vocabulary and encouraging expressive self-awareness; Emotional Intelligence and Communication – “Human Skills for Human People”: Explained the way emotions work in our brain and emphasized the value of being empathetic and also the relevance of self-empathy; focused on the power of active listening, and provided students with practical strategies for emotionally intelligent interactions; Decision-Making – “Who Do You Think You Are?”: Encouraged critical reflection on personal actions and emotional responses and created awareness on the decision-making process individuals have to face daily and provided space for reflection upon the responsibility of action taking and decision making.

The program's expected outcomes included greater self-awareness, enhanced decision-making confidence, and a deeper understanding of interpersonal dynamics and communication patterns at national and international levels. The project contemplated using the State of the Mind Questionnaire at the beginning of the training and reutilizing it at the end of the four sessions to analyze and assess measurable results after completion of the training.

This was the reason behind the choice of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form (TEIQue-SF) by Petrides. It is a 30-item measure questionnaire that evaluates the global trait of Emotional Intelligence. It can also be used to assess the four traits of Emotional Intelligence factors: Well-Being, Self-Control, Emotionality, and Sociability. Throughout the training, the four main topics of the sessions were presented to the students and each of them directly linked to these four traits, and each of the traits was explained and exemplified in the light of Petrides's theory.

The questionnaire's name was changed to the State of the Mind Questionnaire to appeal more to the students. They were told that the questionnaire would make them reflect upon how they know and manage their emotions and would be a quantitative means of understanding whether the training affected them or not. It is worth mentioning that the original name of the questionnaire was constantly introduced and highlighted, its roots explained, and the logo and sources appeared in all visual aids used.

The sessions were facilitated as follows: In each of the five groups, the first session always started with an introduction by the lecturer, the purpose of the project and the training, and a table of contents. Then, there was an explanation of the purpose of having to reply to a questionnaire, which would be the same in the first and last sessions. Students were given the Link to the online questionnaire and the time to fill it out.

The first session's topic was nonverbal language communication, and its title was "The Walk that Talks." Each session presented a topic, and each title raised a brief brainstorming and some remembrance of previous sessions when students were asked to identify which session had dealt with what topic.

After filling out the questionnaire, the main topic of communication was linked to the trait Sociability of TEIQue- SF and the reasons why were elicited from the students and then explained in more depth and linked with the concepts of self-awareness and self-regulation. Students were asked about the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication and reflected upon the principles to consider when using verbal language in several different contexts. This task made them aware of how they used verbal language when communicating with others. It also helped them identify ways to improve their daily communication and personal and professional relationships by identifying possible barriers and means to overcome them. Next, students were asked to identify different ways to communicate nonverbally. Although one may think that this task would be easily and rapidly concluded, it always took much longer than verbal communication tasks. Students were surprised to hear about technical terms like proxemics, rapport, haptics, kinesics, paralanguage, chronemics, and meanings. However, after explaining the concepts, they immediately came up with objective examples of each and always tried to find alternative examples and associations with their daily lives.

At the end of each session, students were given some food to reflect upon until the next session and to help them put concepts into practice. Also, students were suggested to use an immediate way to measure which aspects of each session had impacted each group. This was done through a challenge: Share a word or concept that you took from today's session. This challenge was repeated at the start of the following session,

working as a type of revision from the previous week: share something you remember from the last session.

The second session focused on the group and individual knowledge of emotional intelligence, emotions and their meaning and role. Its title was Emotional Literacy: Are Words Gone with the Wind? The trait of well-being was the Link to TEIQue-SF, and there would always be an ice-breaker discussion on the associated concepts of self-esteem, happiness, and optimism and its connection to motivation: self and external. In this session, students got familiar with the concept of Emotional Intelligence, its five components according to Goleman and how it works brain-wise. Then, they were led to describe emotions, where and how we can identify them, and their functions. A more interactive and ludicrous part of the session would occur when students were invited to show emotions physically and, after that, to come up with a list of the emotions they remembered. Food for thought exercise was for each student to look at a thorough list of emotions provided and try to describe an emotion they felt during the week mentally that had never occurred to them before. The following session answers the question: How did you feel this week? Alternatively, How are you feeling today always led to discussion, explanation and laughter.

The third session on Emotional Intelligence and Communication highlighted the trait emotionality, defined by Petrides, therefore focusing on emotion perception, noticing our own and other people's emotions; Emotion expression in terms of our way of doing it; Empathy: by experimenting to have different looks on the same subjects; and Relationships: working to create awareness on the true purpose of relationships and knowing how to sustain them. Students were given exercises to practice empathy and, at the same time, assertiveness and were given situations of possible miscommunication to be able to find emotionally intelligent solutions for them.

The last session focused on decision-making and the EI trait associated with self-control. By becoming aware of concepts like impulse management, emotion regulation and stress management and their meanings, students were in contact with subjects they seldom reflected upon, like the strength and intensity of emotions that you have to deal with when making decisions, how well one can manage one's emotions in high stake situations where even minor mistakes can lead to tragic endings; and the ability to deal with the aftermath of emotions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The initial plan was to conduct one live session and three online sessions. However, as shown on Table 1, the project was conducted in various forms in all five countries for different reasons. It might have been more beneficial for the project to have had all institutions participating live. It proved difficult to have students completing the State of the Mind Questionnaire at the end, once they realized they should have memorized or recorded some place the required code names from the first session. That constitutes the main reason for the low numerical result in this questionnaire: only approximately half of the participants (43) responded.

With the Portuguese students, the four sessions were performed face-to-face, as it could be done in the Military Academy's classrooms. In the other cases, we had mixed situations.

With the student cadets from the Military Academy of Zaragoza, Spain, there was the chance to go to the Academy and meet them in person. Two sessions were done live and two online, as being with the students in person for four consecutive weeks was impossible.

In Bulgaria, meeting the group in person and giving them a session out of four in their presence was also possible. This group was constituted by military personnel but not cadets. It was a heterogeneous group whose ages ranged from 25 to 54.

As for Latvia, the best alternative for classes was to try an intensive approach, which allowed the cadets to be with the same group live for two mornings in two days. The four sessions were facilitated for the cadets involved throughout the two mornings.

In Italy, due to administrative delays that prevented the sessions from being held in person, the four training sessions were carried out online, one per week.

During the 90-minute sessions, students got acquainted with the proposed contents. Then, the sessions went on as interactive and lively as possible by getting students to elaborate on the topics and have a joint reflection on them.

At the end of the training, the activities and sessions were expected to impact the trainees' development of self-awareness, empowerment in decision-making, awareness of the ways students communicate and relate with others, and awareness of the effect of the way students act and react to others. However, out of the 103 participants, only 43 completed pre- and post-project assessments, limiting the sample for final data analysis. The fact that students needed to use a code name when completing the questionnaire and keep that same code name in the final test might have made it more challenging to complete the tasks than initially planned. However, a separate feedback questionnaire received 57 responses, offering valuable qualitative insights.

Although the project could not materialize as initially planned, the four sessions per group happened, and the objective outcomes were positive and encouraging in terms of continuing future projects. These objective results were mirrored in the feedback questionnaire that students were asked to fill out at the end of the training and after completing the State of the Mind Questionnaire.

In the feedback questionnaire, participants emphasized the most positive aspects after the training: increased emotional awareness, improved communication skills, the relevance of the training to military careers, and interactive learning. As for the identified areas for improvement, students highlighted the session duration (some stated that 90 minutes was too much, others stated that they should have had more sessions), the preference for face-to-face formats, and the desire for more practical exercises (besides debates and discussions on the topics).

5. CONCLUSION

In times of global uncertainty and emotional disconnection, leadership must go beyond strategic decision-making to embrace healing and reconnecting as a central component. Through Emotional Intelligence and the metaphorical Emotional Toolbox, we can learn to lead and do so with empathy, care, and awareness. Empathy is one of the most potent EQ leadership competencies, particularly when accompanied by the ability to perceive and express emotions. According to Anabel Jensen (Freedman, 2019, p. 196), empathy is an indispensable part of emotional healing. Emotional expression not only fosters authenticity but also enhances physical and mental health. The five steps to empathy are recognizing body language, listening, noticing the pain, responding verbally, and responding with action. Social skills are a practical extension of empathy, manifested through Active listening, Constructive feedback, openness to criticism and praise and Maintaining respectful dialogue even under stress. When we mention self-awareness and self-regulation, we are talking about the need for a self-development process involving the expression of emotions and the knowledge and regulation of emotions, which means being aware of and able to modify emotions when necessary.

The Emotional Intelligence Skills Training for Better Communication project demonstrated the critical role of self-awareness and emotional communication skills in cadets' personal and professional development across multiple European military institutions. Through targeted sessions that explored non-verbal communication, emotional literacy, empathy, decision-making, and emotional regulation, students were invited to reflect on their emotional processes and the impact of their interactions with others. By linking training content directly to key emotional intelligence traits—such as sociability, well-being, emotionality, and self-control—the program encouraged cadets to understand their emotional experiences better and develop practical communication strategies. Although challenges such as participation rates and different learning formats impacted the scope of quantitative data, qualitative feedback highlighted significant improvements in emotional awareness, communication skills, and decision-making confidence.

This paper has presented a reflection on how Emotional Intelligence (EI) and its associated skills can serve as a bridge between the individual and the Other, emphasizing the metaphorical and practical use of the "emotional toolbox" as both a communication tool and a healing mechanism for emotional and social wounds. The training initiative implemented at the military Academy underscores the necessity of equipping future leaders with competencies that enable effective interpersonal communication, emotional resilience, and cultural awareness. Ultimately, nurturing these emotional competencies in future military leaders fosters more effective communication and more empathetic, resilient, and socially responsible leadership, essential for navigating the complex interpersonal and emotional demands of contemporary military and global contexts.

In light of the emotional decline identified in recent global studies, particularly among younger generations who will constitute the future leadership cohort, initiatives such

as Emotional Intelligence Skills Training for Better Communication are not only timely but essential. Strengthening emotional intelligence must be prioritized within educational and organizational settings to reverse the trend of emotional deterioration and to build healthier, more empathetic, and ultimately more effective leaders for the future.

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