



By: Jay Long

Amid the many crucible moments confronting America's military leaders in 2020 were moments of brilliance, perhaps best personified by [Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth Wright's response to the George Floyd protests](#). While other defense leaders formulated their responses, Chief Master Sergeant Wright released a twitter thread with clarity and conviction, setting the tone for subsequent Pentagon responses and spearheading military action to tackle institutional racism.

Chief Master Sergeant Wright's actions were undoubtedly an extension of the exceptional character that led to his assignment as the Air Force's senior enlisted leader. That said, we can challenge ourselves to see his response less as a superhuman feat and more as a moment of exceptional emotional intelligence (EI). Embracing the concept of EI as a key

leadership competency can help the military set conditions to cultivate more leaders like this.

Already, there are early signs that the military is embracing EI such as the [Marine Corps piloting EI tests](#) or [Security Force Advisory Brigade leaders](#) endorsing EI. That said, at present EI is often treated as a luxury instead of a modern leadership necessity – evidenced by oversights like its absence from the Army’s leadership development models and training pipelines. The consequence of this oversight is that even when EI exercises appear in development efforts, they are often in the form of cherry-picking individual competencies. While an ad hoc approach is better than nothing, the institutional cost of lacking uniform metrics for benchmarking or resourcing development is a force where EI is a rarity, instead of a norm.

The lack of EI has dangerous repercussions, especially in our [increasingly digital force](#). As cross-functional technology brings together personality types that would not have interacted in the past, the success of our digital transformations hinge on leaders with advanced interpersonal skills. Consequently, failure to develop these competencies at the institutional level does not abdicate our leaders from needing these skills. Instead, it places unreasonable burden on leaders to demonstrate complex behavioral competencies under pressure with no formal preparation.

The need for high EI leaders is not new – Iraq War research connected [toxic leadership and military suicides](#). More recently, the famous [‘Col. Ned Stark’ letter](#) noted “emotional intelligence is necessary to build the trust and relationships necessary to solve our airmen’s problems. Yet, the Air Force does not screen for this or any other positive behavioral attribute.”

The military can mitigate these risks and cultivate that talent it needs by baking EI into our institutional DNA, frameworks, and training models. This journey begins with defining EI,

understanding the limitations of current training methods, and leveraging creative training strategies.

## What is EI?

Researchers John Mayer and Peter Salovey [first defined](#) EI in 1990 as “the ability to accurately perceive your own and others’ emotions; to understand the signals that emotions send about relationships; and to manage your own and others’ emotions.” Daniel Goleman further popularized EI in his 2004 [Harvard Business Review article “What makes a Leader?”](#) Goleman’s definition for EI used a skill-based model comprised of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill that allowed “the best leaders to maximize their own performance and their follower’s performance.” Further, his research demonstrated EI was just as important for professional success as technical skills and IQ.

In 2009, Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves built off this model in [Emotional Intelligence 2.0](#). Their model divided EI into personal competencies (self-awareness and self-management) and social competencies (social awareness and relationship management), and offered [EQ](#) as a quantitative EI measurement. Their quantitative model recommends training plans tied to performance incentives, like showing EI accounted for “58% of performance in all types of jobs,” leading high EI leaders to make \$29,000 more than low EI peers.

Later, Christine Porath and Christine Pearson’s article [The price of incivility](#) explored EI’s influence on institutional performance. After studying more than 800 subjects in 17 industries they found low EI professional environments led 48% of subjects to “decrease their work effort,” caused 12% of subjects to leave their last job, and decreased organizational commitment in 78% of people.

## A failure to define

Given the Army’s struggle [to retain talent](#), and EI’s quantified benefits for individuals and

institutions, its absence from our leadership development models is puzzling. As the Army prepares for the dual mandate of digitally transforming the force and [drawing strength from diversity](#), it must prioritize EI development. A first step towards cultivating EI is defining it. This 'define first' approach was at the heart of Army efforts to check toxic leadership, resulting in their 2012 definition in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22 Army Leadership and the Profession, resulting in reforms like [firing toxic bosses](#).

While defining EI and eliminating toxic leadership sets a minimum performance threshold, cultivating it requires integration with our leadership development models. Evidence that we have not integrated EI into current models comes from the conspicuous absence of any definition for "emotional intelligence" in the Army's 2015 Leadership Development Field Manual. Instead, the document encourages leaders to master processes, like counseling subordinates, or skills, like goal setting. When the field manual does discuss attributes, it emphasizes character traits like discipline and intellectual skills like judgement. While these elements are all important, the current model's avoidance of emotional development risks treating leadership as an intellectual challenge instead of a human interaction that places a premium on trust building. Perhaps worse, the manual encourages leaders to "reduce emotional reactions," trying to remove the human element from a profession that prides itself on being 'a people business.'

### **A failure to train**

Our failure to define EI or integrate it into our leadership development models has resulted in a predictable failure to cultivate this attribute. At present, most military leadership development tools fall into roughly three general camps: classroom discussions, resource intensive experiential learning, and problem-solving courses. Classroom tools, like [tactical decision making games](#), are inexpensive and easy to execute, but bias towards intellectual discussion versus experiential learning. Conversely, experiential learning opportunities like [Ranger School](#) are time and resource expensive, but treat leadership development as a [secondary effort in their curriculum](#). Consider that while Ranger School provides peer

reviews, they are often used more for grading evaluations than a student's EI development. The middle ground between these options are tools like leader reaction courses, which emphasize cognitive skills like problem solving and group cohesion, but again neglect EI.

While these different training strategies may integrate individual EI elements, their indirect or ad hoc nature blunts collective development of this competency. That is both unfortunate and avoidable. The military has experience translating abstract competencies into objective and comprehensive training programs, with physical fitness as an example. While physical fitness was always central to military success, the Army did not assess it through tools like an "[individual efficiency test](#)" until 1920. In the decades that followed, the military made fitness central to readiness, exploring diverse competencies like muscular strength and cardiovascular endurance.

A similar, though hopefully faster, progression can occur with EI. While the Marine Corps has explored the predictive relationship between EI in recruit training success, the broader military has failed to treat EI as a universal prerequisite for entering the service. Perhaps it is time to set emotional fitness baselines. There is a recognized need for [quantified leadership evaluations](#) and the Army's [Battalion Command Assessment Program](#) and [Colonels Command Assessment Programs](#) are ideal testing venues.

The conversation around evolving training requirements is not a condemnation of current strategies, instead, it reflects changing leadership development requirements shared with the civilian sector. [Harvard research](#) found just 40% of millennial leaders describe their company's learning and development program as "excellent," compared to 67% of baby boomers that offered such high praise.

### **A failure to scale**

One of the first myths to debunk around developing EI is assuming it develops by default if people spend enough time in service. For example, [Gen. \(retired\) Robert Scales](#) advocates

for older close combat forces in the hopes they will have the complex emotional and technical competencies needed in modern war. This argument is based, in part, on demographic data from the US [Special Operations Command](#), whose average special operations officer is 34 and enlisted personnel is 29. The rough correlation here is that more time maturing leads to more mature leaders, and consequently more developed EI.

There are two key problems with assuming that time itself yields these skills. First, it prevents the military from scaling this competency at speed. If it takes a decade of experience to develop EI, then we are, at best, years away from generating the leaders we need. Second, we must remember that time itself does not develop this trait - it is instead learning through feedback loops during that time period. Accordingly, we cannot assume that repeating the same mistakes over longer time horizons cultivates EI growth. While there is no replacement for operational experience, years of painful trial and error result in growth only when EI skills like self-awareness and self-regulation are already present so that [failure can be approached in a constructive way](#). Further, until we assign a clear definition and baseline standard (with relevant performance metrics) there is no way to tell if our personnel are developing appropriately, even if we rely on a time-based strategy.

### **Exploring development strategies**

Creating an EI enabled force requires training strategies aligned to military personnel preferences. As a rule, the military has to avoid yet another PowerPoint presentation or abstract classroom activity to address this gap. Furthermore, solely relying on training approaches like the readings, discussions, or even activities recommended in Bradberry's work may be insufficient. Instead, this intellectual exploration should be complemented by experiential learning, employing deliberate practice to cultivate behavioral competencies.

A relevant example of a military experiment around a hybrid classroom and experiential learning strategy is [mindfulness training](#) which is still evolving within military development models. The success of these efforts, seen in the Army's expanded investment in

performance coaches, offers initial momentum towards EI competencies like self-awareness. Further, normalizing ‘soft-skill’ development sets conditions for developing competencies like social awareness and relationship management from Bradberry’s model. These socially oriented EI skills help leaders develop [co-regulation](#) skills so they can better understand and influence the emotional states of others. In turn, co-regulation enables leaders to cultivate a calm, focused, and confident command environment.

As military leaders search for training strategies aligned to these development goals, they might find value in exploring Dr. Lissa Pohl’s research from the University of Kentucky on equine assisted learning (EAL). While the military has long pivoted from cavalry troops as a primary means of battlefield transportation, and with it training horsemanship, it resurfaced in popular culture when [Special Forces ‘horse soldiers’](#) toppled the Taliban.

Perhaps more relevant for most military leaders is EAL’s demonstrated impact on EI and leadership. Dr. Pohl’s research found a one-day [EAL workshop](#) for nurses enhanced patient care for a 6-month period, a level of impact few leadership development venues have achieved. The longevity of these interactions owes much to EAL’s unique learning environment, providing students total immersion in a [deliberate practice](#) environment characterized by constant and immediate feedback loops between human and horse.

### **A military test case**

EAL’s potential led to a battalion level pilot at the 101st Airborne Division, which adapted Dr. Pohl’s research under the leadership of Captain Tom Shandy and Chris Mullican of Circle M Therapeutic Farms. While obvious modifications were made, such as removing the focus on using stethoscopes, the general flow of drills was retained from her studies. This program led soldiers through a progression from discussing nonverbal communication to establishing initial rapport while putting on a bridle in a nearby pasture, to round pen and riding drills. The pilot demonstrated that the training could be conducted by tactical level

units easily and cheaply, while generating several rewarding outcome insights.

First, we found EAL struck a reciprocal balance between training self-awareness and social skills. As students overcame their personal discomfort through autoregulation, they were able to influence and lower their horse's anxiety through co-regulation. This built confidence in the nonverbal skills needed to extend through discomfort and *turn towards* their equine partners in a calm and assertive manner.

Second, students on horseback discovered that they were signaling constantly, and often unconsciously, through equine feedback. For example, before getting into the saddle, many students are unaware of the conflicting messages issued by their feet, knees, hips, reins and bodyweight. Often, these unconscious habits resulted in frustrated horses, unable to cross the round pen in a straight line due to a torrent of diverging commands. New riders seeking to correct their stumbling progress often sent ever more aggressive and unclear signals, so success in overcoming this challenge required riders to correct their misaligned messaging and clarify their signaling. This trains students to disrupt the same types of patterns that can cause leaders to frustrate their teams with unclear communications or undefined priorities, triggering cycles of underperformance and exhaustion.

Third, EAL trained students in setting boundaries and authority, while retaining rapport. In command environments, failure to establish sufficient presence can be just as dangerous as being overbearing, as teams flounder in the absence of clear direction.

Finally, there is no faking EAL sessions. Unlike social learning environments where colleagues can "go through the motions," horses have no concept of faking it. This realism mitigates the false positives that can occur in classroom environments when apathy limits peer engagement. Even small doses can improve participant EI. Even more compelling, it is simple and action oriented - creating a fun learning environment that transfers to high performance under stress.



### Final thoughts

As the military embraces the challenge of building a diverse and digitally enabled force, its leaders will be required to demonstrate new levels of mastery in EI and interpersonal skills. Accordingly, our leadership development efforts must develop and leverage strategies that engage soldiers while offering immediate performance feedback to cultivate confidence in these competencies.

Further, if we have learned anything from national challenges like COVID-19 or addressing racial injustice, high EI leaders are an immediate need for America's military. While reaching this goal will require institutional investment and commitment, its benefits for retention, resilience, and performance are worth it.

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