

# Training in Emotional Intelligence: A Proposed Solution to COVID-19 Related Problems that Interfere with Innovation Management

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## Abstract

People from all over the world are overwhelmed by the news and information related to the global COVID-19 pandemic on a daily basis. The social, economic, political, environmental, and technological landscapes have been undergoing unprecedented vicissitudes which have hindered innovation management. It hence behooves policy makers and leaders to develop and implement effective solutions and practices to immediately address the issues and catastrophes engendered by COVID-19. We discuss the promises of emotional intelligence to deal with the negative impact of COVID-19 and propose a list of practical recommendations for policy makers and leaders to consider when developing and assigning emotional intelligence training.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Emotional Intelligence, Training.

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## 1 Introduction

The global pandemic, COVID-19, has resulted in serious negative impacts on the global economy and has caused catastrophic human consequences (Szmigiera, 2022; UN News, 2020a). The crisis is believed to be “yet to come” and will result in unprecedented economic, physical, and psychological shocks to people from all over the world, particularly to the people in developing countries (UN News, 2020b). The escalation of COVID-19 has led to closures for a countless number of businesses, schools, and stores across countries from all over the world with the hope to mitigate the impact and spread of coronavirus. It has changed our ways of living and socializing in various ways. For example, it becomes normative for people to perform social distancing and self-quarantine and there are new methods to meet and greet (e.g., air hi, fist bump, and elbow bump) (Dumont, 2020). Schools and businesses have mandated their employees to work from home and expected them to switch to work via virtual platforms. In some parts of the world, wearing a mask and performing body temperature checks has become mandatory for citizens before they go to some public places, such as bus and train stations, grocery stores, and shopping centers. These changes have aroused considerable emotional upheaval.

As Mention, Ferreira, and Torkkeli (2020) have observed, COVID-19 has caused anxiety around the world, yet at the same time it has sparked widespread innovation. Much of this innovation

has directly dealt with how to contain the spread of the pandemic, or with innovative new vaccine techniques. Yet as they further observed, it also stimulated new ways of working from home, and a wide variety of other new techniques and digital technologies in the workplace. Whilst some of these new digital technologies may yield positive benefits for both workers and organizations for years to come they have yielded mixed results. For example, in most cases productivity has not suffered, and costs (office space, etc.) may even be reduced, yet team cohesion and trust may suffer when teamwork is imperative (Mention, Torkkeli, & Ferreira, 2020). Some employees have greatly enjoyed working from home, yet others feel isolated, lonely, and depressed.

Although innovation is necessary to handle almost any crisis, the anxiety that has been generated by the COVID-19 pandemic may interfere with innovation in a variety of ways, as discussed below. Training in emotional intelligence may both help employees manage their anxieties enough to remain innovative, and at the same time help them cope with the new working conditions that the pandemic has created.

## 2 Emotional Intelligence and Coronavirus Infection Rate

Due to the continuing exposure to the news and reports regarding the elevation of confirmed cases and deaths as a result of COVID-19 on a daily basis, numerous people across the world inevitably feel unsafe, anxious, fearful, and depressed as a result of the rising unpredictability and seriousness of the situation (Deutschendorf, 2020). Individuals' mental health and emotional well-being are thus negatively impacted (Persich et al., 2021). As a consequence of the stresses and anxieties being developed during the pandemic of COVID-19, it is easier for people to contract coronavirus because stresses, bad feelings, and anxieties will suppress immune functions, thus leading to the rising vulnerability for people (O'Leary, 1990; Reiche, Nunes, & Morimoto, 2004). Among different types of abilities or traits an individual has, emotional intelligence is known to be a key ability or trait which one may depend on to manage and bounce back from stresses and negative feelings and to keep feeling positive and optimistic so that one may stay healthy, resilient, satisfied, and productive (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2018; Farnia, Nafukho, & Petrides, 2018; Martínez-Monteaquedo et al., 2019; Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010; Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2017a; Petrides et al., 2016). Hence, we argue that emotional intelligence may be one of the effective solutions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 across multiple levels.

There is considerable evidence to support the contention that emotionally intelligent people are healthier in general, and there is also some evidence that they are more likely to obey COVID safety protocols and to avoid risky behaviors that might increase their chances of catching COVID-19. First, two meta-analyses have found that emotionally intelligent people are healthier. In an early meta-analysis, Schutte et al. (2007) found that emotionally intelligent people have better mental health, psychosomatic health, and physical health. A second meta-analysis confirmed that emotional intelligence is positively related to mental, psychosomatic, and physical health (Martins et al., 2010). Second, a comprehensive meta-analysis by Sarrionandia and Mikolajczak (2020) provides compelling evidence of the relationships between emotional intelligence and behavioral variables associated with health. Of particular importance, their meta-analysis found that emotional intelligence is positively related to having a healthy diet, physical activity, sleep quality, and social support. Likewise, their meta-analysis found that emotional intelligence is negatively related to unhealthy behaviors, such as substance abuse and reckless driving. Their study results imply that people with a high level of emotional intelligence should be less likely to engage in risky behaviors that expose them to a greater risk of catching COVID. More direct evidence on this is provided by a study which found that people with higher emotional intelligence are more likely

to adhere to COVID-19 health protocols (Aliyari, Bakhtiari, & Kianimoghadam, 2022). Scholars have argued that there is a “behavioral immune system” that can help people be resistant to catching COVID-19, and a large-scale empirical study has found that the behavioral immune system is related to following COVID-19 health and safety measures, such as social distancing, avoiding touching one’s face, wearing a facemask, and cleaning and disinfecting (Shook et al., 2020). Studies have found that during the COVID-19 outbreak that many people engaged in panic buying (Islam et al., 2021; Prentice, Quach, & Thaichon, 2022). A comprehensive review of panic buying during COVID-19 concluded that, “psychological factors that are influenced internally and externally that cause loss of control, consumer emotional intelligence will compensate for the loss of perceived control by buying useful products designed to meet needs” (Harahap et al., 2021, p. 229). Consequently, it is likely that emotionally intelligent consumers will respond to COVID-19 by remaining calm and shopping in a rational manner, thus using social distancing, avoiding crowded places when possible, and using masks and sanitizers even when they are optional, all of which may decrease their probability of catching coronavirus. As the recent study demonstrated (Aliyari et al., 2022), emotionally intelligent people are more likely to follow COVID-19 health protocols and thus to have higher behavioral immunity to COVID-19.

Healthcare professionals across the world are known to experience anxiety, depression, and distress due to exceedingly high work demands and workload; as such, there are calls for psychological supports and interventions to healthcare professionals (e.g., Lai et al., 2020). We argue that assigning emotional intelligence trainings to healthcare professionals may allow them to better manage their emotions and stresses to experience more positive feelings and less negative feelings, which may lead to less experienced anxiety, depression, and distress (e.g., Martins et al., 2010; Schutte et al., 2007). A longitudinal study examined whether emotional intelligence training could help with the anxieties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and it found that, “although mental health concerns generally increased after the start of the pandemic, individuals who completed the EI training program scored lower on depression, suicidal ideation, and state anxiety relative to individuals who had been assigned to the placebo training program” (Persich et al., 2021, p. 1).

Innovation plays an important role in enhancing and revitalizing the economy, and is known to be a factor which can pull an economy out of financial crisis (Hausman & Johnston, 2014). Since COVID-19 is known to cause fear, anxiety, and worries (Coelho et al., 2020; Persich et al., 2021), it may distract individuals’ thinking due to impaired mental health and emotional well-being, thus fewer thoughts directed towards innovation. Innovation often depends upon teamwork (Fay et al., 2015), including informal interactions, brainstorming in small groups, and other face-to-face encounters. If people are afraid to work closely with others this could hinder innovative group sessions – i.e., less innovative ideas and/or initiatives. Conversely, people may also suffer anxiety, loneliness, and other problems due to having to work from home. Emotional intelligence may be a solution to address these issues. Emotionally intelligent individuals have higher levels of self-regulation and self-control and are adaptive, flexible, and optimistic (Jena & Goyal, 2022). Improving working professionals’ emotional intelligence via training will help them better manage the fear and anxiety caused by COVID-19, cause them to act innovatively, and lead an organization to be more forward-looking and innovative (Buehring & Moore, 2018; Jena & Goyal, 2022).

At the firm level, businesses can still perform at a relatively satisfactory level during the COVID-19 pandemic if their workforce consists of emotionally intelligent employees because emotionally intelligent employees are generally productive and high-performing (O’Boyle et al., 2011). Healthcare organizations have been worn out due to dramatic uptake in demands for coronavirus treatments and quarantines. Emotional intelligence may significantly alleviate burdens for healthcare organizations to ensure their normal operations because emotionally intelligent

healthcare professionals are high performers who know how to get necessary job resources to handle the challenging job demands to enable their organizations to effectively function (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2017b). In addition, emotionally intelligent citizens who are less prone to contract coronavirus due to their better health status and stronger immune system may decrease their demand to visit healthcare organizations to look for checkups and treatments which may relieve the burden for healthcare organizations.

At the macro-level, state/province-level and nation-level leaders may also benefit from emotional intelligence because emotionally intelligent leaders are effective leaders and they are able to make shrewd decisions and implement effective policies to deal with COVID-19 (Walter, Cole, & Humphrey, 2011).

### 3 Recommendations for Emotional Intelligence Trainings

It is of note that the results of two meta-analyses converged and supported the view that emotional intelligence can be trained and developed (Hodzic et al., 2018; Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019). We provided the following list of suggestions about how emotional intelligence trainings can be developed and structured.

- 1) Emotional intelligence trainings should be developed and contextualized to reflect its relevance for COVID-19. Recommendations 2 and 4 may apply to almost any organization, while recommendations 3 and 6 may be particularly useful in healthcare settings or other settings where bringing groups of people together entails particularly high risks of spreading COVID-19. Recommendations 3, 5, and 6 may be useful to reach the general public or other particularly large groups of people where face-to-face training is not financially viable or otherwise feasible.
- 2) Depending on the nature and context of a job, emotional intelligence trainings may be developed based on different emotional intelligence models (ability emotional intelligence versus trait emotional intelligence) to fit the nature and context of a job (Petrides, 2017).
- 3) Due to health concerns, virtual platforms may be used to deliver emotional intelligence trainings. Artificial intelligence (AI) technology may be implemented to enhance emotional intelligence trainings and to track progresses of one's development and mastery of emotional intelligence (e.g., using AI to detect how well a participant is managing his/her emotions in a hypothetical scenario).
- 4) We encourage organizations to consider appointing someone as an "emotional intelligence manager" to manage the emotions of employees, to provide emotional intelligence trainings and feedback to employees, and to foster the formation of emotionally intelligent climate in the organization (Miao, Qian, & Humphrey, 2021).
- 5) Popular TV networks may broadcast emotional intelligence trainings to the general populations (Miao et al., 2021). Social media websites may also feature and run emotional intelligence trainings. The assistance from influential persons (e.g., leaders and celebrities) may be sought to increase people's awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence trainings.
- 6) Emotionally intelligent AI machines may be developed and used to manage the emotions of people and to train one's emotional intelligence simultaneously (e.g., Schuller & Schuller, 2018). For example, emotionally intelligent AI machines may alleviate healthcare workers' stresses and anxieties and train their emotional intelligence simultaneously via role modeling by recognizing the feelings of healthcare workers and displaying compassion, understanding, and other appropriate emotions in the actual workplace. AI may also assist individuals to properly display, perceive, and manage their emotions and help individuals to make good choices based on computer-generated information (Schutte & Malouff, 2016).

## 4 Conclusions

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, different methods and solutions have been developed and applied to mitigate its impact on the global community. In this article, we discussed the promises of emotional intelligence as an effective solution to diminish the impact of COVID-19 across multiple levels and provided a list of recommendations about emotional intelligence trainings. We avow that following the practices suggested in this article may reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 and may help with innovation management. We hence encourage leaders and policy makers to consider the advice in this article to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

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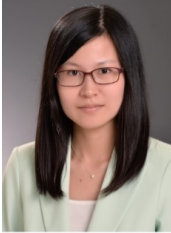
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