



Kieran MacCourt,
Marketing
Director,
Dove Nest Group



EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT GRADUATE DEVELOPMENT

Emotional Intelligence (EI) and leadership behaviour are increasingly seen as essential skills to develop in the leaders of the future. However, Kieran MacCourt, Marketing Director of Dove Nest Group, asks if it is ever possible to start developing leaders too early.

My first experience of emotional intelligence was over 20 years ago, when I first arrived in a new role having recently graduated. At that time, I was full of ideas and enthusiasm and naturally believed everybody needed to hear just how good my opinions were. I attended a team building event, designed to bond together a disparate group of people, all from different backgrounds and age groups, into a cohesive team.

By the end of the first day, my manager pulled me to one side to explain that, within a few short hours, I had single

handedly rubbed everyone up the wrong way. He actually used language far more colourful than that. But the message was clear: rather than bond with the team, I had irritated everyone and isolated myself. On hearing his candid feedback, I was both confused and crestfallen. Immediately the soul searching and questioning began: 'what had I done?' 'why were they irritated?' 'surely I was only giving helpful and practical advice?' Thankfully, I took his advice, kept my head down and managed to slowly turn the situation around.

Since then, I've worked for a variety of organisations, in a variety of roles in a variety of countries. But that first hard lesson has never left me. Regret isn't always a useful emotion, but when I think back to that first team building experience, I regret that I had never even heard the term 'Emotional Intelligence', let alone understood the meaning of it.

History has a habit of repeating itself. This autumn will likely see cohorts of newly recruited graduates arriving in their new organisations. They too will likely be filled

with enthusiasm, ambition, new ideas and technical expertise. So how will they avoid making the same mistakes I made?

Current thinking points towards emotional intelligence as an answer. At Dove Nest, we provide Balfour Beatty, one of the UK's leading construction companies, with their graduate development programme. Our comprehensive development programme helps their graduates avoid the type of mistake I made in my early career by placing emotional intelligence and leadership at its core.

"During the 2-year programme, our graduates develop their skills in a number of different areas including leadership, management and communications, stakeholder engagement and business awareness, as well as technical skills and training they would undertake as part of their role." – Sandra Crowe, Emerging Talent Specialist at Balfour Beatty

The underlying philosophy of EQ (emotional intelligence) is to start with oneself. Understanding one's own emotions is the foundation upon which the skills of emotional intelligence can be developed. However, in the programme, Balfour Beatty take EQ beyond that of a simple management skill, such as learning how to delegate, or how to make decisions. Although these skills are useful, they are often deployed when and where the situation demands. In contrast EQ is something that constantly informs and influences behaviour, relationships and interactions. Something that I would have been very grateful to know during my first team building session.

The Balfour Beatty programme is demanding, challenging and rewarding in equal measure. Speaking to one of their graduates, we asked them 'what were your expectations coming into the programme?'

"I expected to increase my self-awareness, learning what I am good at and not so good at. To take me out of my comfort zone, to test myself and improve." – Nathan, Balfour Beatty graduate

The programme certainly puts graduates through their paces. Graduates are exposed to both the theory and practice

of leadership and management. By the end of the programme, graduates can expect to come away equipped with skills in: managing their profile, creating a positive impression, the characteristics and behaviours of leadership, emotional intelligence, influencing, working with and managing others.

The programme needs to be this challenging. My own personal example is testimony to how easy it is to create the wrong impression, engender resentment and damage both one's personal profile and working relationships. In all likelihood, new graduates in Balfour Beatty will face similar challenges. Imagine a newly appointed graduate, highly technically skilled, but perhaps lacking in the softer skills of management. The graduate has to work alongside colleagues and subcontractors from a variety of backgrounds. How well will the long-serving contractor relate to being given advice on how to do the job, by someone potentially 20 years younger than them?

Through the experience of the programme, graduates become equipped with the knowledge, understanding and skills to communicate with, influence and motivate others. Nathan's experience reflects this.

"Giving feedback to people was something I found very difficult. By the end of the programme I found it much easier and I am more confident in giving feedback." – Nathan, Balfour Beatty graduate

Nathan's experience is an example of how equipping graduates with emotional intelligence brings greater effectiveness to them as a potential leader, and echoes the current management thinking.

"A high EQ helps individuals to communicate better, reduce their anxiety and stress, defuse conflicts, improve relationships, empathize with others, and effectively overcome life's challenges". World of Psychology website - Paula Durlofsky, PhD

It is to Balfour Beatty's credit that they place such importance on this aspect of management, putting the theory into

practice, translating it into practical skills for their graduates.

Balfour Beatty have recognised the potential gap between technical skills and the skills needed to work effectively with other people. It is their belief that equipping their graduate talent with an understanding of how to work with and lead other people is essential. Acquiring these skills not only benefits their effectiveness in their new roles, but also ear-marks them as having the right skills and behaviours for future positions.

So, what has been Balfour Beatty's experience of the programme, and what does the rest of the organisation think about it?

"Feedback from the business has been very positive on the Graduate Development Programme so far and we're looking forward to having more business input in the future development of the programme to ensure it is fit for purpose and supports our future talent to be the best they can be in their chosen career area." – Sandra Crowe, Emerging Talent Specialist Balfour Beatty

Returning to my own story of early career failure, if I'd had access to a programme like that of Balfour Beatty, then there is a good chance the outcome would have been different. What can be said with more certainty is that adding emotional intelligence awareness and skills to an already technically skilled graduate will benefit both the individual and the organisation.

"Our programme stretches and supports graduates on their development journey towards an exciting and rewarding career with Balfour Beatty." – Sandra Crowe, Emerging Talent Specialist Balfour Beatty

Dove Nest Group have provided Balfour Beatty with graduate development programmes since 2014. Since then almost 200 participants have successfully graduated the programme. Dove Nest specialise in talent development and leadership behaviour, by combining experiential learning with occupational psychology.