

# The power of emotional intelligence: Turn a season to forget into a season to remember

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EI



**Take a season-long journey with fictional hockey coach Kate to see how her use of emotional intelligence (EI) transformed a potentially dreadful campaign into a season to celebrate. This scenario-based article will help you conceptualise EI in a coaching context, and provide you with ideas on how to embed elements into your own coaching practice.**

- **EI is the ability to identify, assess and control your own emotions, and the emotions of others, in order to be able to perform to your absolute potential.**
- **Self-awareness is a vital first stage in becoming an emotionally intelligent coach.**
- **Knowing your own motivations and inspirations, strengths and weaknesses will help you recognise the personality traits and emotional needs of other people.**
- **After determining where your participants sit on the ‘EI scale’ for the multiple facets of EI, you can then begin to dial up or dial down their (or your own) levels of EI.**
- **Manipulating emotions in various situations can turn potentially negative outcomes into positive ones.**

You can almost hear the boom. The field of sports psychology has exploded in popularity in recent years.

The area of EI has hitched a ride on the bandwagon. Like a beacon of knowledge, EI has been drawing sports coaches in, lured by glowing endorsements from renowned psychologists and wave after wave of positive publicity.

In our five previous articles, and series of four accompanying videos, we have explored the concept in intricate detail, demonstrating its power as a tool for performance gain and personal development, and as a means for growing and sustaining participation.

In this final chapter, with the help once again of ConnectedCoaches Content Champion [Catherine Baker](#) – the founder of behavioural profiling, training and performance company Sport and Beyond – we put EI to the ultimate test.

We shadow imaginary hockey coach Kate through some choppy waters during a single hypothetical season as coach of Someplace Ladies.

We will see how she becomes adept at treating potential calamities as opportunities, and how by utilising various facets of EI, she is able to turn her many trials into triumphs.

### **The psychology of success**

Kate has done her research and is well versed in the science behind EI – which is the ability to identify, assess and control your own emotions, and the emotions of others, in order to be able to perform to your absolute potential.

She is well aware that the number of hours spent exercising her mind on the subject far exceeds the time she has spent putting theory into practice.

But the dawning of a new season will offer her the opportunity to change that.

Kate read (in a ConnectedCoaches blog [\[ \]](#)) that EI is being intelligent about your emotions. And an intelligent [first step](#) for any coach is to advance your [self-awareness](#) levels by learning to scrutinise your own feelings.

Acquiring a conscious perception of your own personality – your motivations and inspirations, strengths and weaknesses – gives you a good starting point from which to recognise, dissect and analyse the different emotional traits that make up other people's characters.

The logic sounds simple, and is highly effective: the more you know your players, the better you are going to be at coaching them.

Having evaluated her levels of self-awareness, Kate is in buoyant mood at the first squad session of pre-season.

**She has memorised the mantra 'emotions drive thoughts, thoughts drive behaviour, and behaviour drives performance'**. Now, she is looking forward to putting this mantra into practice by tapping into her knowledge and heightened sense of self to pick up on the different facets of EI in her players, and to see exactly where they sit on the 'EI scale'.

But it isn't long before her bubble of optimism bursts. And to pinpoint the pin, she is forced to reflect on her **own** shortcomings as a coach.

### **Prioritise person over player**

This is Kate's first season as second team coach.

She had previously been at the helm of the first team, and it soon becomes apparent she has fallen into the trap of pushing her players too hard in training, instilling a competitive edge many are not used to, and, indeed, are uncomfortable with.

Being an emotionally intelligent coach allows her to recognise the error of her ways sooner rather than later.

'There are three things Kate must do in this situation,' says Catherine. 'The first is to remind herself, in a general sense, what she is in coaching for; the second is to ask herself what her aims are for this group; and finally, looking outwards to them as individuals, what is it they need from her?'

'This will allow her to distinguish what her players' [motivations](#) are and what they want out of playing

hockey.

‘She will then be able to categorise her players: those who are there to have fun; those who thrive on competition; those who are there to get fit; and those who attend in order to meet up with their mates – helping her build up that important, complete picture of them as individuals, by having got to know the person before the player.’

**This is valuable knowledge, and Kate is able to modify and adapt her behaviour and her approach to training accordingly.**

She comes to the conclusion that some of the girls would benefit by being moved up to the A team – having singled out those who thrive on competition and who possess the [mindset](#) to flourish at a higher standard.

She also recognises that, with regard to one or two younger members of the team, the [parents](#) seem more motivated than their daughters. Are they perhaps pushing their own goals on to their offspring, which is having a detrimental influence on their levels of enjoyment?

‘I think this parental issue is something that is key across all sports and something coaches don’t always look at,’ says Catherine.

‘By observing and watching how the parents, and grandparents, behave and what their motivations seem to be, you learn a lot about how to deal with their [child](#).

‘You are going to get some parents who are pushing their child to attend even though they might not want to be there. You will deal with that child in a different way than the child who is desperate to come every week, even though their parents struggle to get them to training.’

### **Learn to temper your temper**

Kate feels she is getting to know each person behind each player, and the group have a newly aligned set of team goals. She knows what makes them tick individually and how they are likely to react in certain situations at training. But tapping into their emotions during match days is proving a more taxing proposition.

She still has some way to go to understand them as performers.

How good are they at controlling their emotions to maximise their performance? Which players show leadership potential and are capable of [making decisions for themselves](#), and which are most resilient and adept at problem solving under [pressure](#)? How good are the players at perceiving the emotions of their team members, and knowing when to offer words of encouragement to a teammate to abate nerves (or when to deliver a well-meaning kick up the proverbial backside in the case of a deliberate lack of effort)?

She realises a month or two into the season that she is getting ahead of herself, and that, in terms of understanding their emotions, there is a more pressing concern that needs her attention: understanding her own emotions.

She has been losing her temper with a few girls who she feels [aren’t applying themselves in matches](#). And her increased sense of self-awareness tells her that the root of the problem may in fact lie with her, not them.

‘That applies to coaching across the board,’ says Catherine, ‘whether you are a Sunday morning volunteer mum or dad or a high performance coach: that impact of what you are feeling and how you manage your emotions on the players.’

**‘So Kate will be picking up on facets of EI like stress management, impulse control and emotion**

## regulation and expression.

‘She needs to think, “Why am I losing my temper? Am I not regulating my internal emotions very well?” That then feeds into expressing your emotions. So if you are not regulating them very well, that might still be okay if you have got high levels of control around your emotional expression. If you have trouble with this, and you are annoyed internally, then your frustration comes straight out.

‘If you have also got low levels of impulse control, then you might snap and shout at them quite quickly. And regarding stress management, you may be feeling under pressure because this is your first year in charge of the B team. You want them to do well for the sake of the club, as well as the individuals in the team, and you are not dealing with that stress very well.’

And how does Kate know all this? Because after each session, she takes the time to [reflect](#) on what went well, what didn’t go quite so well and which aspects she could have improved.

Reflection allows her to pick up on the fact she is losing her temper too quickly. Only after identifying the ‘**what**’ can she begin to unpick ‘**why**’.

‘And that is where your understanding around EI comes in, because by relating it back to the EI construct, it helps you understand why you didn’t get a great outcome and make sure that it doesn’t happen again.’

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## Delivering a confidence boost

Kate has already succeeded in avoiding a catalogue of potential long-term repercussions by learning to manage the relationship with her players more effectively.

One key benefit of learning to keep her impulse control in check, regulate and express her emotions in a more even-handed manner and manage her rising stress levels has been the positive impact it has had on participation.

The squad is a much happier bunch, and through word of mouth, former players have been persuaded to rejoin the club, in the knowledge they will be entering into a challenging but fun environment, with aligned team goals, which also serves as a social stomping ground for like-minded souls in the community who love hockey.

‘If you’ve got a situation where you are always snapping at people, you’ve got the direct impact on those girls and ladies, who probably won’t enjoy it as much and may stop coming, not to mention the effect it is having on the morale of the rest of the group.’

Kate feels she is now able to focus on the process of fine-tuning individual emotional issues.

Such as dealing with an incident involving her goalkeeper, who is beating herself up after letting in a last-minute goal in their previous match. Kate believes the player’s [confidence](#) has been bruised and that she thinks her teammates blame her for losing them points.

‘The first thing is to give someone like that time,’ explains Catherine. ‘Talk to them. Try to find out how they feel about it. Because you might think their confidence has taken a hit, when actually it hasn’t.

‘Then you can begin to put an EI framework around it. Is her self-esteem quite low, and her levels of optimism quite low? And use your own empathy to try to put yourself in her shoes. The way to do that is to ask her questions, don’t just make assumptions.

‘And don’t just think it all has to be on you. It might be you’ll get better information on that girl and how she is feeling by listening to some of her teammates. Does she have a particularly strong friend in the team for instance? Or you might even speak to one of her parents.’

### **The ability to use agility**

The season is progressing well. But, as a coach, you are never far away from your next dilemma.

And when Kate diagnoses poor stamina levels as an area to work on in training, she is surprised – when she expresses her concerns to the group and tells them of her determination to focus more on fitness and conditioning – that her plan does not meet with the unanimous approval of the team.

Agreeing on group objectives and group behaviours at the start of a season may not be enough.

There should be a willingness to tweak throughout the course of a campaign – agility being an important element of EI.

‘It is very important for coaches to be agile and to be able to adapt, from day to day, week to week,’ says Catherine.

**‘A lot of coaches set the boundaries, objectives and approach at the beginning of the season but don’t keep coming back and checking it is still what they need as a group to keep getting the best out of everyone.’**

‘It is the same thing with an employee. Much better to sit down with them and regularly see how they are doing than to leave it to an annual appraisal, when things could have gone horribly off course and you haven’t been picking up on things as you are going along.’

Fortunately, Kate has been doing just this. Their regular catch-up chats have become self-reinforcing and group reinforcing, meaning she is able to gently remind those players who weren't keen on her approach that they had all bought into this potential scenario as a group.

They duly fall into line.

## **Brain training**

At the end of the season, Kate reflects on her 'emotional' journey.

She is conscious of what a real game changer EI has been, both literally, for the team, and personally, for her development as a coach.

The brain is a muscle that needs exercising in order to make it sharper, stronger and more agile.

Training her mind in the intricacies of EI has allowed her to unlock her true potential, while also maximising the potential of those she coaches.

Put another way, enforcing EI has been a win-win for all concerned.

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## **Next steps**

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- [Emotional intelligence: How to recognise and coach a nervous participant at your coaching sessions \(Video 1\)](#)
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