

## Follower perceptions of the emotional intelligence of change leaders

### A qualitative study

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#### Abstract

We present and explore a follower-centric model of how employees perceive the emotional intelligence (EI) of change leaders. Qualitative investigations of EI are rare and have not explored the field of organizational change leadership. Accordingly, we analyse qualitative data from a series of interviews set within the context of organizational change. We examine follower attributions about the abilities of their leaders to manage and express their own emotions and to respond appropriately to the followers' emotions. The findings reveal that the ways in which leaders deal with emotion might be the key to followers sharing their own emotions with them. The impact of perceived leader EI on follower responses to change is also discussed. The complexity and ambivalence of our participants' perceptions of the EI of their change leaders highlight the utility of a qualitative investigation.

#### Keywords

Emotions, emotional intelligence, leadership, organizational change

### Introduction: a need to understand follower perceptions of leader emotional intelligence during change

Organizational change can be an emotional experience when people anticipate or experience gains and losses (Huy, 2002; Wolfram Cox, 1997), when there is uncertainty (French, 2001) and when processes are perceived as fair or unfair (Barclay et al., 2005), too quick, too slow

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or too frequent (Smollan et al., 2010). Frijda (2000) posits that emotions are short-lived responses to events, which George (2000) argues may diffuse into more persistent moods. During change these affective reactions can cycle from 'fear to envy, from rivalry to anger, from enthusiasm to cynicism, or from energetic enjoyment to apathy' (French, 2001: 480).

When employees experience the emotions of change they may find the support of others, including their managers, to be beneficial (Fugate et al., 2002). The literature on stress has shown that helpful responses from others, including leaders of change, assist people in coping with demanding experiences (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988; Robinson and Griffiths, 2005). Leaders may also react emotionally to change, and therefore how they regulate and express their emotions impacts on followers. Research by George (2000) and Humphrey (2002) has shown that leader–follower relationships are imbued with emotional content. In the context of change, as Szabla (2007) has demonstrated, the emotional levels in these relationships rise. However, emotions in organizational settings have traditionally been seen as illogical and disruptive (Domagalski, 1999) and accordingly people, especially in organizational settings, have been discouraged from displaying them – or even talking about them (Bolton, 2005; Diefendorff and Richard, 2003). Employees may feel particularly uncomfortable about sharing their emotions with their bosses, and, as Vince (2006: 351) suggests, 'Self-protective behaviour based on fear is one of the ways in which silence is maintained in organizations.' This may be due to a variety of factors. A key one might be the follower's perception of the emotional intelligence (EI) of the leader. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), EI consists of four levels of ascending abilities: perception, appraisal and expression of emotion; emotional facilitation of thinking; understanding and analyzing emotions and employing emotional knowledge; and reflective regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. However, if followers consciously or subconsciously hide negative emotions about change from their leaders (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2006; Turnbull, 1999), the latter are likely to be unaware of a potentially debilitating form of resistance.

The EI of the leader, *as perceived by the follower*, thus becomes a crucial element in the follower's engagement with or resistance to the change. While much research has explored the relationship between follower EI and perceptions of others' leadership ability, it has seldom addressed follower perceptions of leader EI. A recent study by Felfe and Schyns (2010) has shown the influence of perceptions of leader personality on followers and our study takes a similar line on perceived leader EI ability. We will thus build on the follower-centric approach to the study of leadership recommended by Meindl (1995) and its specific application to leader EI (see Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2002, 2005). A further gap in the literature is how the context of organizational change heightens the need for leaders to be seen by followers to be exhibiting EI. Change leaders with high EI could support followers by acknowledging their emotional reactions and by helping them to understand and manage the challenges of change. Some researchers have therefore called for leaders to be selected and trained in EI (e.g. Groves et al., 2008), while others, like Higgs and Rowland (2002), have noted the usefulness of training leaders in both EI and change management.

The research question we seek to answer is how employees' perceptions of the EI of change leaders influence their own cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions to a change. Our contribution to the literature is twofold. First, it lies in presenting a model of leader EI as perceived by followers before and during organizational change. Second, we will reveal the findings of a qualitative study of how follower perceptions of change leader EI impacted on their responses to the change. There is a paucity of qualitative research into EI

in general, let alone in the narrower field of leadership and organizational change, and our study therefore provides a fresh perspective. In particular, we will explore some of the complexities and contradictions in follower perceptions of leader EI. In so doing, we aim to provide a finer-grained understanding of the psychological dynamics of leadership and followership during organizational change. We also need to signal that there are a number of dimensions to the construct of EI, in its varied and disputed forms. Another issue is that people (in this case followers) are not able to detect many of the EI abilities of others (such as leaders of change) because they seldom have access to their inner emotional worlds (van Rooy and Viswesvaran, 2004).

## **Review of extant literature**

In this section we firstly note the roles various actors play in organizational change. Secondly, we highlight the contentious issues in the debate about what EI is and how it is measured, particularly as it relates to perceptions of leadership ability. Thirdly, we investigate the reasons followers may have in showing or hiding their emotions. Fourthly, we address the central theme of this paper, the three-way relationships between EI, leadership and organizational change. We conclude this section by presenting our model of these relationships.

### ***Roles in organizational change***

Exactly what constitutes leadership has been the subject of considerable debate, but, apart from the concept of influence, there is little consensus, claim Bennis (2007) and Parry and Bryman (2006). Much leadership literature tends to use a broad-brush approach to terminology by implicitly referring to leaders as those in formal management positions. Likewise, the word 'follower' is mostly used to identify subordinates, even though the process of influence often extends to peers, higher-level managers and external stakeholders. In the context of organizational change, some researchers have sought to distinguish between those who lead it and those who manage or implement it (e.g. Caldwell, 2003; Higgs and Rowland, 2000). Hierarchy does not necessarily determine the roles various actors in change are given or assume. However, to simplify nomenclature, we will use the term 'leaders' for formal management roles, whether leading or implementing change, and 'followers' for subordinates. We are aware that these terms are ideologically loaded and that employee perceptions of their managers' and their own roles embrace socially constructed notions of leadership and followership (Ford and Lawler, 2007; Grint and Jackson, 2010; Meindl, 1995). In adopting a follower-centric approach in this paper we emphasize how followers make attributions about the EI of change leaders.

### ***EI – construct and controversy***

The concept of EI is one of the most controversial in organizational behaviour. For some examples of the debate see Antonakis et al. (2009), Murphy (2006), Zeidner et al. (2009) and the special issues of journals such as *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(3), 2004, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(4), 2005 and *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 3(2), 2010.

The key aspects of the debate revolve around several issues. Firstly, there is substantial disagreement about whether EI is based on ability or personality or both, and therefore how it

is measured. In their classification of research into EI, Ashkanasy and Daus (2005) identify three streams that conceptualize EI as (1) ability, in line with the Mayer and Salovey (1997) model and which is measured by objectively scored tests, (2) self-reported measures based on the same model and (3) 'commercially available tests that go beyond the Mayer-Salovey definition' (p. 441), and that include measures of personality and other factors. O'Boyle et al. (2011) use the same form of classification but simply label Stream 3 as mixed models. The Stream 1 academic pioneers of the concept (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2000, 2004) and their Streams 1 and 2 supporters (e.g. Côté, 2010; Daus and Ashkanasy, 2005; Jordan and Lawrence, 2009) believe that EI is ability only and that other conceptualizations should not use the word intelligence. Those in Stream 3 use mixed models of ability, personality and other affect-laden concepts, such as motivation and resilience (e.g. Bar-On, 1997, 2006; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2000). Some authors have focussed on what they distinctly label 'trait EI' (Lindebaum and Cartwright, 2010; Petrides et al., 2007; Tett et al., 2005). For example, Petrides (2010: 137) defines trait EI as a 'constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies . . . a domain . . . which clearly lies outside the taxonomy of human cognitive ability'.

There has been substantial disagreement on how EI is measured and which measures are best (Joseph and Newman, 2010; McEnrue and Groves, 2006; van Rooy and Viswesvaran, 2004). Ashkanasy and Daus (2005), Joseph and Newman (2010) and O'Boyle et al. (2011) have argued that ability EI must be objectively measured through performance-based tests since self-reported measures of ability EI merely tap perceptions of ability. The limitations of this form of self-reported EI have also been acknowledged by researchers who administer these types of instruments for pragmatic reasons (e.g. Jordan and Lawrence, 2009; Wong and Law, 2002). Self-reported data are easier and quicker to gather than scientific tests of ability and some instruments have been contextualized for organizational research. They are much shorter than the Mayer et al. (2004) version, which uses a more complex testing and scoring system. Trait or mixed-model EI is measured with self-reports (e.g. Bar-On, 1997; Tett et al., 2005). However, Lindebaum and Cartwright (2010) go as far as to assert that *all* self-report measures are trait measures because individuals do not have the means to accurately assess their own abilities.

Secondly, there are critics who do not believe that EI of any type, and regardless of the nature of the researchers, offers anything useful beyond extant studies of cognitive intelligence or personality (e.g. Antonakis, 2004; Locke, 2005). The third issue revolves around strong responses from sections of the research community to assertions about the value of EI and that some critics fail to distinguish between the scientific rigour of peer-reviewed publications and studies which do not meet these standards (e.g. Ashkanasy and Daus, 2005; Landy, 2005; Zeidner et al., 2009). Fineman (2000: 105) has objected to the 'commodification' of EI, 'bait for performance-hungry, competitively anxious, managers and executives', while Murphy and Sideman (2006) lament its 'fadification'. Fourthly, there have been heated arguments – and confusing results – about the contribution EI (ability and/or trait) makes to work performance (Côté and Miners, 2006; Joseph and Newman, 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2011). Finally – and importantly for the thrust of our article – there is disagreement as to how much EI contributes to leadership effectiveness (Antonakis et al., 2009; Clarke, 2010; Lindebaum and Cartwright, 2010; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005).

It is tempting to sidestep this jungle of competing claims by treading cautiously through the relatively empty interpretivist field. However, the major issues that continue to plague research into EI and leadership are the meaning of the term *intelligence*, how it can be

measured and how it relates to performance. Research into EI and its relationship to leadership is overwhelmingly positivist and in the literature review we must therefore provide a sound base from which we can begin a qualitative journey. We take on board the views of various researchers that there is a problem in mixing research streams when very different conceptualizations of the construct are in use. While even a recent special issue of a journal reveals some consent that the debate has been overanalyzed, the positions of various camps still remain far apart (e.g. Cherniss, 2010; Jordan et al., 2010; Petrides, 2010). Also of note, as Jordan et al. (2010) point out, is that most peer-reviewed articles use the Mayer and Salovey (1997) ability model.

We support the view that EI is ability but note that ability and personality often work in tandem in influencing behaviour. In practice, however, followers may see little value in contemplating whether leader behaviour reflects EI as ability or personality. What is of more concern to them is that their leaders express and regulate their own emotions appropriately and respond constructively to the followers' emotions, including when change takes place. In reviewing the literature on leader EI we distinguish between the various camps but leave it to the readers to determine their own allegiances.

### *EI and leadership*

Various schools of leadership have examined the emotional content of leader–follower relationships, including charismatic leadership (Wasielewski, 1985), transformational leadership (Bass, 2001) and authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005). At the heart of leader–follower relationships are the emotions and moods that emanate from them and sustain them. Organizational life contains daily and ongoing events and issues that trigger emotions, often flowing from interaction with others in the hierarchy.

According to George (2000: 1044), 'leadership is an emotion-laden process, both from a leader and a follower perspective' and she emphasizes the need for a follower-centric approach to EI and leadership. Kellett et al. (2002) assert that a leader's emotional abilities contribute to follower perceptions of leader effectiveness. In arguing for a change in direction to follower-centric models of leadership, Meindl (1995: 331) says, 'In essence, leadership is very much in the eyes of the beholder: followers, not the leader – and not researchers – define it.' In this vein, Felfe and Schyns (2010) researched followers' perceptions of the personalities of their leaders and found that this was related to their commitment to them. Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) have produced a useful follower-centric model in which they reinforce the notion that leader–member relations have emotional content. They suggest that followers make positive attributions about leaders partly because of the genuine ways in which they are able to demonstrate transformational behaviours. They propose that leaders with high EI are able to control their emotions and convey to followers the sincerity of their intentions and that followers with high EI pick up on these cues.

Empirical studies of ability EI have mostly shown that it is to some degree related to perceived leader effectiveness (Clarke, 2010; Palmer et al., 2001; Rosete and Ciarochi, 2005; Sy et al., 2006, Wang and Huang, 2009; Wong and Law, 2002). However, Weinberger (2009) found no correlation. Most researchers using mixed and trait models have found a moderate to significant relationship between their use of the EI construct and leadership (Barbuto and Burbach, 2006; Butler and Chinowski, 2006; Higgs and Rowland, 2002; Mandell and Pherwani, 2003). In contrast, Lindebaum and Cartwright (2010) found no relationship.

They used Wong and Law's (2002) ability model, but claim that it is a trait measure since it relies on self-reported EI. Most researchers in the various camps have used transformational leadership measures (Bass, 2001) because they believe that transformational leaders engage followers on an emotional level. One of the cornerstones of transformational leadership is individualized consideration, which can involve appropriate responses to a followers' emotion, and which has been shown to lead to affective commitment (Bono and Judge, 2003). In a recent meta-analysis of ability and trait measures, using published studies and unpublished dissertations, Harms and Credé (2010) found that trait EI measures correlated more with transformational leadership than ability EI measures did. However, they commented that same source ratings and ratings by others produced different results. They noted as one limitation of their study that self-reports exaggerate EI scores.

For a number of reasons one has to be cautious in making a blanket statement that EI is or is not related to leadership effectiveness. Firstly, as we have pointed out, there are competing conceptualizations of the construct of EI. Secondly, some researchers have used self-report measures in gauging leader EI while others have used the Mayer et al. (2004) instrument which has 141 items and is not contextualized for organizational purposes. Thirdly, although most studies have found that EI to some extent predicts leadership ability, it is evident that in several cases only *some* EI abilities or traits were related to *some* leadership abilities. For example, Rubin et al. (2005) found that the ability to recognize emotion in others predicted transformational leadership, and Clarke (2010) found that using emotions to facilitate thinking, was significantly related to idealized influence.

Finally, some of the above researchers surveyed leaders on their own EI and leadership abilities, others chose to use self-reported EI instruments for leaders but follower-reported measures of others' leadership effectiveness, and a few investigated leader and follower perceptions of leadership ability. Apparently only two studies have actually required followers to evaluate the EI of their leaders. In one, Ferres and Connell (2004), using a little known mixed-EI model, asked followers to rate the EI of their leaders. In the second, Lindebaum and Cartwright (2010), using Wong and Law's (2002) questionnaire, required leaders to rate their own EI while their line managers and two followers rated the EI and leadership style of the leaders. They found considerable variance between the scores of the different actors. Requiring people to evaluate the EI of others is problematic in the sense that EI has intra-personal dimensions which are seldom evident to others (van Rooy and Viswesvaran, 2004). For example, a follower cannot easily discern a leader's cognitive processes that underlie understanding of own or others' emotions. It is often when leaders *do not* anticipate or respond to follower emotions or *cannot* appropriately express or manage their own emotions that followers' perceptions of leader EI are formed (Waples and Connelly, 2008). As Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002: 603) point out:

a leader who feels negatively towards a member may unconsciously display negative emotion while expressing a positive message as a means of influencing the member through symbolic management . . . If the member can detect unconscious indicators of negative (felt) emotion, then it is likely that the leader's influence attempt will be ineffective, resulting in a breakdown of trust, an essential ingredient of the leader-member relationship.

Research has shown that, to some degree, EI scores in one group of abilities correlate with others (Mayer et al., 2008). For example, a person who has the ability to control his or her own emotions is likely to be able to respond appropriately to the emotions of others. Joseph



and Newman's (2010) 'cascading model' indicates that before emotional regulation takes place, emotional perception, then emotional understanding, have to occur.

The empirical evidence from quantitative research into EI and leadership is therefore confusing, and qualitative studies are rare. Of the latter, Akerjordet and Severinsson (2004) investigated EI by interviewing mental health nurses on their emotional experiences at work. Some noted the benefits of supervisory and collegial support. For example, one nurse remarked, 'It is about sharing experiences, cognitive learning, emotional maturation and reflection' (p. 167). In a study of hospice nurses, Clarke (2006b: 456) used focus groups to document their affective experiences in a 'climate where individuals are able to discuss freely the emotional content of their work'. Cross and Travaglione (2003) and Williams (2007) interviewed leaders and found evidence of EI using mixed-model concepts. Focus groups conducted by Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2005) revealed how supervisors expressing and responding to emotions influenced follower perceptions of their leadership ability. However, none of these qualitative studies dealt with organizational change.

### *Leader EI and follower emotional expression*

Leaders with high EI should be able to detect follower emotions. However, if the followers are deliberately or subconsciously hiding their emotions they are creating barriers to the communication of potentially important information. Only those leaders with advanced capabilities in the understanding of others' emotions will then sense hidden emotions. The literature on emotional labour, the belief that certain emotions should be displayed and others hidden (Bolton, 2005), has seldom explored the interacting effects of EI, particularly in leader-follower relationships. The perceived need to hide emotions depends on many factors, such as organizational culture, personality issues, gender and ethnic influences and leader-follower relationships (Bolton, 2005; Smollan, 2006). While Brotheridge (2006), Joseph and Newman (2010), Prati et al. (2009) and Wong and Law (2002) have shown that people with high EI are better able to manage emotional labour, the relationship between leader EI and followers showing or hiding emotions has received little attention. Leaders high in EI would probably allocate themselves a good score on the Jordan and Lawrence (2009: 461) questionnaire item: 'I can read fellow team members "true" feelings, even if they try to hide them.' While scores on various dimensions of EI often correlate, it is unlikely that a leader who has influenced a follower to suppress emotional expression could still have the ability to discern it. Studies by Turnbull (1999) and Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2006) have revealed that a number of employees felt uncomfortable sharing their emotions during change, partly because of the awkward or destructive ways in which leaders treated their emotions.

### *Leader EI and organizational change*

Conceptual and empirical studies have investigated how leaders deal with the emotions of followers in change. Fox and Amichai-Hamburger (2001) advise leaders that to engage followers in change they should inject emotion into their communications but caution that it must be done with authenticity. Groves (2006) surveyed leaders and their followers and found that the ability of leaders to express emotion appropriately led to enhanced follower views of their abilities as visionary and charismatic change leaders. He suggests that organizations initiating change would benefit from appointing leaders who can establish

productive emotional connections with their staff and from providing training and development programmes to enhance these abilities. Ferres and Connell (2004) found that followers' perceptions of high leader EI (using a mixed-model questionnaire) produced less cynicism about an organizational change.

With reference to followers' emotions, Huy (2002) reports that middle managers in his study were expected to be task-oriented and not get emotionally involved. However, those who ignored these instructions believed that they were able to facilitate work groups of followers that 'could adapt to change and avoid the serious underperformance associated with extreme chaos or inertia' (p. 59). It should also be noted that leaders with high EI should not only be able to respond to follower emotions but also to anticipate them. In so doing, they will determine how follower emotions could be addressed at individual, group and organizational levels. Piderit (2000) has emphasized that employees react to change in cognitive, affective and behavioural ways but that the affective reactions are often unanticipated or ignored. Of particular relevance is her contention that there are differences within and between these levels of response. Szabla (2007) showed empirically how different leadership approaches triggered followers' emotional responses. In particular, power-coercive strategies evoked strong negative emotions. The literature on organizational justice and change (e.g. Barclay et al., 2005) has also shown how negative emotions can be ignited by poor change leaders. While these studies have not investigated the concept of leader EI, the results could be partly interpreted as the consequences of low leader EI.

In one study of EI and change, participants were asked to rate their own EI (using an ability-focussed questionnaire but which also contained trait EI items), personality and attitudes to change (Vakola et al., 2004). Leadership issues were not involved. The researchers concluded that while there was some relationship between personality and EI, the latter provided added value to the study of responses to change. In particular, participants high in EI adapted better to change.

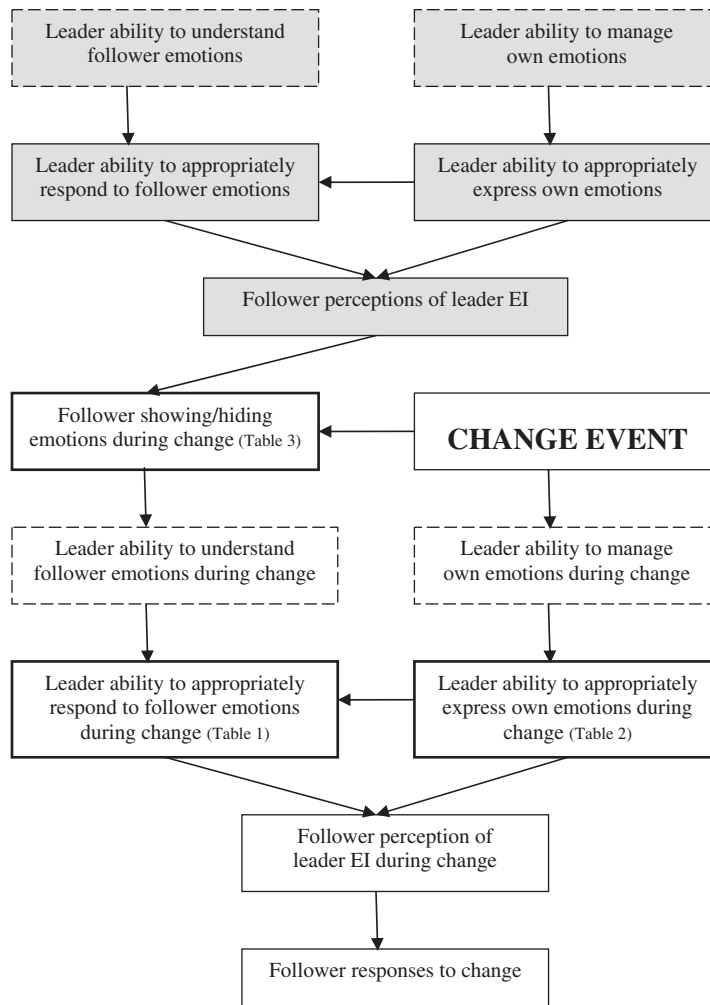
Follower perceptions of leader EI during change will be coloured by prior experience in other work-related contexts. Followers who have judged leaders as generally poor in demonstrating understanding of others emotions, or managing their own emotions, will not expect much difference during an organizational change. Trust in a leader's EI abilities may therefore discourage followers from expressing their emotions when change occurs. However, since every interaction is somewhat different, followers may be surprised when such leaders act more appropriately in a change.

### *A model of follower perceptions of change leader EI*

To summarize the extant research, the meaning of the term EI and its utility as a key leadership attribute are contested, and studies of the role of leader EI in organizational change are sparse. In line with Felfe and Schyns (2010), who measured followers' *perceptions* of leader personality, not the actual personality of the leader, we intend exploring follower perceptions of the EI ability of leaders and specifically how these influence their own cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions to organizational change.

In attempting to address this issue we emphasize again that we do not expect to tap the wide range of leader EI abilities that are evident in conceptual and quantitative studies. The foundations of Figure 1 are the concepts embedded in the Mayer and Salovey (1997) model and three others derived from it and contextualized for organizational issues. The Mayer and Salovey model lays out EI on four 'branches' of ascending skills that include aspects of own





**Figure 1.** A model of follower perception of change leader EI. (Tables 1, 2 and 3 refer to data that ultimately were gathered in answer to the research question.)

and others' emotions: perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitate thought, understanding emotion and managing emotion. Wong and Law's (2002) research allows for four categories: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion and regulation of own emotion. The model of Jordan and Lawrence (2009) also has four categories: awareness of own emotion, management of own emotion, awareness of others' emotions and management of others' emotion. Joseph and Newman (2010) propose that some emotional abilities precede others: emotional perception leads to emotional understanding which in turn underpins emotional regulation. Together they contribute to performance. These models identify more discrete abilities than those captured in our model because followers are seldom able to gain access to the cognitive and affective processes of leaders. They may therefore resort to making attributions based on what they can see and hear (Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2002).

Figure 1 focusses on how followers perceive the EI of change leaders and takes account of views (e.g. Joseph and Newman, 2010) that EI abilities often work together. When change occurs, followers have probably already developed some evaluations of leader EI from a history of experience from two main sources. The first is an assessment of how appropriately leaders have responded to follower emotions and, by implication, whether leaders were able to understand these emotions. The second is the extent to which followers perceive leaders to have appropriately managed and expressed their own emotions in leader–follower interactions. This implies that leaders have understood their own emotions. When organizational change outcomes and processes evoke emotion in followers and leaders, followers who have no faith in their leaders' ability to deal with own and others' emotions may decide to conceal their feelings. Perceived leader EI therefore in some way shapes followers' responses to change on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels. The relationships are depicted in the model. The dotted lines indicate leader EI abilities that followers may not discern but that underlie those that are more evident.

In the next section of this article we present a case for how an interpretivist approach might produce fresh insights into follower perceptions of the EI of change leaders, and help to answer our research question.

## Methodology

### *Quantitative versus qualitative approaches*

As we have noted, one of the controversies in EI has been about measurement (Conte, 2005; McEnrue and Groves, 2006; Zeidner et al., 2009). Of those who believe that EI is a form of ability, there is some agreement that it can only be assessed through tests (Matthews et al., 2007; Mayer et al., 2000, 2004). Other researchers (e.g. Jordan and Lawrence, 2009; Wang and Huang, 2009; Wong and Law, 2002) have relied on self-report measures, despite their potential weaknesses of self-serving bias and inaccuracy (Zeidner et al., 2009). Further weaknesses of quantitative approaches are that follower perceptions of leader EI have seldom been examined and that followers are unable to assess many of their leaders' EI abilities.

Moving out of the quantitative paradigm of EI is therefore fraught with more hazards because researchers have implied that EI must be *measured* with validated – albeit contested – instruments. The logic is quite clear: scientists, even if they do not agree with each other on the concept of EI, determine the components of ability and/or personality, and, in developing instruments, include all the items they believe are relevant (Fineman, 2004). Qualitative investigations might be deemed even more inexact if they exclude key elements. Yet qualitative studies of the experience of emotions in organizations have been conducted (e.g. Dasborough, 2006), including those relating to change (e.g. Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2006; Turnbull, 1999; Vince, 2006). As Fineman (2004: 736) argues, 'it is certainly possible to research emotion without measuring it... The understandings so produced are inherently less precise than the simplifications of measurement, but they are likely to be abundant in insight, plausibility and texture.' The role of leadership has also been the subject of qualitative approaches (as suggested by Alvesson and Svingsson, 2003; Bryman, 2004, 2011; Parry and Bryman, 2006), and has been researched in the context of organizational change (Faris and Parry, 2011; Kan and Parry, 2004; Rowland and Parry, 2009).

We take on board the views that the best way to *measure* EI is through performance tests (Mayer et al., 2004) but very few studies have actually measured leader EI in this way (see Clarke, 2010 and Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005, for exceptions). Quantitative measures of

others' EI, which have rarely been used, are perforce subjective interpretations rather than scientific measures of ability. This is not different in concept to using quantitative instruments to measure followers' perceptions of leadership ability. In our study, what is at stake is not what EI leaders possess but how their followers view these abilities.

In using a qualitative approach, we believe we can add to the depth and diversity of the EI debate by seeking evidence of how change participants observed the ability of leaders to manage their own emotions and to understand and deal with follower emotions, and what the consequences were. *Inter alia*, we were also interested to find out whether followers had shown their emotions to their leaders, or hidden them, and why. Quantitative measures might not be able to capture the complexities and nuances of the emotions of leader–follower relationships to the same extent as qualitative investigations. We believe that a number on a Likert scale, aggregated across multiple respondents, might not provide sufficient insight into the influence of leader EI on individual respondents, into specific organizational contexts or into the peculiarities of one organizational change. Therefore, in our study we are not merely exploring whether change leaders are high in ability EI; we are more concerned with how followers *perceive* the EI of leaders during the processes of organizational change and what impact this had on followers.

We are aware that models are not conventionally used in qualitative research. However, Miles and Huberman (1994: 153), in their sourcebook on analyzing qualitative data, use the term causal network, which is a 'display of the most important independent and dependent variables in a field study (shown in boxes) and of the relationships among them (shown by arrows)'. They provide a detailed explanation of how causal networks, which look identical in shape and form to quantitatively testable models, can be used to qualitatively depict the multifarious facets of phenomena under study. Causal networks can be constructed in inductive or deductive ways, which they maintain are 'dialectical, rather than mutually exclusive research procedures' (p. 155). Furthermore, and again using language that is typical of quantitative research, they argue that causal networks can be used to make – and test – predictions of cause and effect. It is in the spirit of Miles and Huberman's approach that we undertook this research.

### *The participants*

This study was one among a series of studies into affective reactions to organizational change. Participants were sourced from a number of organizations undergoing significant change in Auckland, New Zealand in 2006 and 2007. Management consultants provided high-level access to these organizations. Twenty-four participants were interviewed, 13 men and 11 women; 16 European/White, two Maori, three Asian and three of Pacific Island backgrounds. At the time of the interview five were in their thirties, 12 in their forties and seven in their fifties. They reported on experience in a variety of industries, organizations, departments and hierarchical levels. They were involved in different types of change, including restructuring, redundancy, job redesign, relocations, mergers and acquisitions. Although convenience sampling was used, these people were intentionally chosen to achieve a heterogeneous sample. The heterogeneity of the sample was designed to maximize the validity of the findings, and to avoid sampling error that might come from demographic homogeneity. The richness and explanatory power of the data were important criteria for the credibility of this research. We were researching a phenomenon rather than a population, thus the representativeness of a sample was not as important as representativeness of the phenomenon.

In using 24 participants we were able to find a useful range of change experiences and demographic differences.

### *The interviews*

We conducted semi-structured interviews which usually lasted about 90 minutes. Participants were invited to select one change experience and most reported on changes that had occurred recently. Early questions were asked that were not directly related to leader EI but which were aimed at surfacing participants' emotional responses to the change. For example, questions were asked about the scale, frequency, speed, timing and fairness of change, and how favourable the outcomes were. Participants were repeatedly asked how each of these elements had affected them on an emotional level. They were also asked whether they had been expected to show or hide their emotions, whether their leaders had the ability to manage change and whether they trusted them. To gain specific insight into their perceptions of leader EI, the key question put to participants was whether their direct managers (and others more senior) had understood what they had thought and felt. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, further probing questions were asked to explore the participants' responses to the actions – and inactions – of their leaders. A sample of interview questions is found in the Appendix.

### *Data analysis*

To aid in data analysis the interviews were transcribed and the parts pertaining to leader EI were highlighted and read several times. A table was drawn up to document participants' views on leader responses to their affective reactions. We also noted how employees processed these responses. While most of the information on leader EI was provided in direct answer to the question of whether managers had understood how participants reacted to the change, we also highlighted comments elsewhere in the transcripts that were indicative of leader EI. We noted when some followers, for various reasons, including low leader EI, had hidden their emotions from their leaders. For the most part participants were talking about their direct managers, whom we have termed leaders, but some also referred to the behaviour of more senior managers, or management in general.

Because we utilized a theory-driven methodology rather than a theory-emergent methodology, data were assigned to predetermined categories, as reflected in Figure 1. One iteration of data collection took place, but several iterations of data analysis were undertaken. In the spirit of theoretical sampling, we interrogated the data several times, in order to clarify the emerging answer to our research question. For example, the ways in which followers were hiding or disguising emotions became more apparent in subsequent readings of the data. Saturation of categories and of the relationships between perceptions and responses was achieved with subsequent readings of the data. Tables 1 to 3 capture responses with respect to the relationships depicted in the model in Figure 1 that pertained to an organizational change. First, we noted followers' perceptions of leaders' response to their emotions and whether these perceptions were positive, negative or ambivalent. Second, we looked for these types of response relative to followers' perceptions of their leaders' abilities to appropriately express or regulate their own emotions. Third, we took account of comments on whether followers had shown their emotions to their leaders or hidden them. The range of answers throughout the interviews provides a rich vein of information on how followers

viewed their leaders. We have interpreted some of these answers as their perceptions of the EI abilities of their leaders.

## Findings

The findings are presented in several ways. The tables contain a few quotes as examples of follower perceptions of the emotional content of leader–follower relationships during an organizational change. Given that context is always relevant and that detail reveals the nuances and complexities of leader–follower relationships, we report on a number of participant experiences in more depth and examine the causes and consequences of their perceptions. Finally, we looked for common threads that ran through the interviews. The 24 participants were coded from A to Y (excluding I).

### *Follower perceptions of leader ability to appropriately respond to follower emotions during change*

The comments in Table 1 indicate that participants judged their leaders' reactions in a number of different ways. They appreciated when their leaders understood how they felt about the change and found that this form of support gave them strength in coping with the emotional demands of change processes and outcomes. This was particularly noticeable in the responses of participants who were in management positions.

Leader EI may also have given some participants emotional capabilities of their own. For example Q, a human resources manager in charge of a major job redesign project, remarked, 'I was occasionally told to calm my enthusiasm. They felt I was too strong, too passionate.' There were negative aspects of the change and her leader believed she was exaggerating the benefits. Although she did not explicitly indicate that management comments were a positive contribution, it seemed that she had adjusted her behaviour to match the expectations of her boss and other managers without negative consequences to herself. In particular, we found consistently that the acknowledgement of followers' feelings reinforced good relationships. Even if this may not have increased commitment to the change, it helped an individual come to terms with negative outcomes and difficult processes.

Conversely, a number of respondents were unimpressed by the lack of understanding and emotional support provided. Some referred to feeling 'disengaged' and 'disenfranchised'.

**Table 1.** Leader ability to appropriately respond to follower emotions during change.

Positive perceptions	Negative perceptions	Ambivalent perceptions
'She had high EQ.' (E)	'He never saw the pain people went through.' (S)	'He was quite sensitive about the way he handled it, which was quite surprising, because he can be a proper bastard.' (C)
'I couldn't have asked for more support than that.' (F)	'It was more lip service than true understanding.' (J)	'Patronizing in some situations, empathetic in others.' (L)
'They responded with sympathy, they really wanted me to stay.' (K)	'He heard the noise but he didn't understand the message.' (M)	'She knew that people were unhappy... She didn't respond at all.' (O)
'He validated my feelings.' (P)	'On one particularly bad occasion that I had cried... a comment was made... "you're a bit soft"' (L)	
'He was very supportive.' (W)		

H was one example of this phenomenon. She was the general manager of an organization until demoted a few months after a takeover. While she had enjoyed considerable support from the previous chairperson, with the new one she said, 'It became awkward because I obviously was upset and I had an emotional outburst.' This made the chairperson extremely uncomfortable and he was unable to respond with conviction. She also found that the new executives to whom she reported would email her from offices next to hers, thereby creating cold and aloof relationships. They seemed to lack empathy and definitely lacked sympathy for her emotional status. 'There was no-one within the organization I could talk to. I lost that support.' The combination of negative outcomes and lack of leader EI led her to negotiate an exit.

Leader–follower relationships are often complex and it is not surprising that there were a number of ambivalent or contradictory reports. The case of B is instructive. As a relatively young and junior human resources officer she was involved in a major downsizing exercise that created a huge workload for her. In addition, she had to work with staff who at times created a hostile environment which was 'very aggressive, almost having a hint of menace and violence to it'. Her leader, who had previously shown an understanding of her emotions, became blind to them in the cauldron of organizational change.

He is the loveliest man...and very supportive...but he just doesn't care when people are drowning... he's got the lowest EQ of anybody I've ever met...he's oblivious to how people are feeling. I remember one day going into his office and bursting into tears and he just couldn't work out what was going on...he didn't really know what to do. He kind of patted me on the back.

In due course she also resigned from the organization.

Perceptions of emotionally intelligent and authentic leadership are formed when leaders act with sincerity. X related how phony he believed his boss was in responding to his distress when he was overlooked for promotion. He believed she was lying to him about why he had not been given the position and he cried in the meeting. Her response was considered both inadequate and inauthentic:

She just put her hand on my back and reassured me, and she said, 'I can understand', that's all she says, and she says, 'Let's say a prayer together.' I said a prayer and I think that's when I made a decision that I was not going to work for [the organization] any more.

We can conclude from these participants' responses that when followers perceived that their leaders genuinely responded to their emotions, they invariably felt a degree of psychological support and tended to adopt more positive attitudes towards the change. Conversely, lack of acknowledgement of their emotions often led participants to feel a sense of anguish or alienation, and contributed to their decision to exit the organization. Influencing these perceptions were the ways in which the leaders expressed or regulated their own emotions, as can be seen in the next section. We were able to conclude a consistent relationship between these variables quite early in data analysis.

### *Follower perceptions of leader ability to appropriately express emotions during change*

We did not expressly ask participants how their leaders had expressed or managed their own emotions and it was therefore unsurprising that no positive perceptions emerged in the interviews. Negative and ambivalent perceptions were more common. The case of H,



**Table 2.** Followers' perceptions of leader ability to appropriately express own emotions during change.

Positive perceptions	Negative perceptions	Ambivalent perceptions
	'arrogant, vain and petty people.' (A) 'She was cold and clinical.' (O) 'He started to thump the table.' (V)	'Our direct manager was quite a hostile sort of guy who didn't communicate really well to most of the team but I got on quite well with him.' (K) 'He yelled and ranted and raved...I like him as person, it was just that the stress and pressure got to him.' (M)

reported above, showed that her manager was not only unable to deal with her emotions but was also unable to deal with his own discomfort.

D, an experienced staff member in a professional services firm, was called into her boss' office and told that she was to be made redundant with immediate effect. She reported that when she refused to leave instantly, 'he was quite angry because I think he wanted to see it done and dusted and he was very uncomfortable over the whole thing'. This exacerbated her own emotions of shock and anger but she admitted that she took pleasure in his discomfort. She also commented that he had probably mistakenly believed that she had not been emotionally affected by her redundancy because she had not cried about it. However, she also thought that her boss felt guilty about her redundancy and showed it. Her comments reflect some mixed views on how he behaved, and why:

He didn't once look me in the eye. I have never forgotten that, either at that meeting or at the one we had subsequently when my lawyer was there. He never once looked me in the eye and that raised all sorts of questions for me because that was so unlike him.

For various reasons she fought her immediate redundancy, engaged a lawyer and negotiated an exit date that better suited her.

Thus it became apparent relatively early in data gathering that leaders who failed to regulate their emotions were considered by their followers to have acted inappropriately. This produced negative consequences for the followers' wellbeing and attitudes to the change. The number of ambivalent answers to our questions is indicative of the mixed messages communicated by some of the leaders through their own emotional expression. Moreover, this leadership shortfall often resulted in negative follower responses to change, often as extreme as exiting the organization.

### *Follower showing/hiding emotions during change*

Several participants observed that their managers were not aware of their feelings because they had deliberately refrained from expressing them. X said that if employees expressed their feelings, or any opposition to change, they become targets and 'a target is always hit upon'. This is evidence of a clear disincentive to express emotion. In this sense, it appeared to several employees that their leaders were unable, and even unwilling, to deal with the follower's emotions and therefore they chose to conceal them when an organizational change took place. We found considerable evidence of a long-standing fashion in Western business settings to hide or disguise the extent of emotional impact. Several participants believed that

**Table 3.** Follower showing/hiding emotions during change.

Showing emotions	Hiding emotions
'I was very upfront about how I felt.' (A)	'I'd learnt not to talk about those things at that level with my bosses over the years.' (C)
'We had a very open and transparent and honest relationship.' (H)	'You just try and keep it in check for yourself.' (K)
'I could sound off with my manager, so I had some personal support to express that sort of frustration.' (P)	'I'm always expected to hide emotion.' (M)
'I spoke my mind but it fell on deaf ears.' (T)	'I was expected to hide the frustration... He knew what I chose to share.' (R)
	'You were to always pretend and show that nothing is affecting you.' (X)

that it was 'unprofessional' to show their emotions while one commented that she was very 'disciplined'.

When D was informed of her immediate redundancy she reported that she felt shocked, distressed and betrayed. However, due to the low EI of her boss she made an effort to regulate her emotions. 'I was upset... I wanted to howl but I wouldn't do that... You try not to show your emotions.' When H was marginalized by the behaviour of the new executives to whom she reported, she experienced intense negative emotions which she battled to contain. She confessed, 'I find it hard to be an actor. I tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve. I found it difficult not to show my emotions.' When she did, as was explained earlier, she found little support. Conversely, G, a senior manager, spoke of the value of peer counselling and managerial support in his organization, and how this had particularly helped him deal with change issues.

Their key learning point from these responses is that the willingness or reluctance of participants to share their emotions with their leaders during an organizational change partly reflects their beliefs about their leaders' history of emotional responsiveness and emotional expression.

## Discussion

We first analyse the three key elements of our model before exploring their intersecting relationships. We then comment on the contribution our study makes to research into a follower-centric approach to change leader EI.

### *Followers' perceptions of leader ability to appropriately respond to follower emotions during change*

Perceptions of the emotional responsiveness of their managers helped our participants deal with change, particularly when the difficulties they were facing were acknowledged and sufficient support was provided. Our research thus supports previous qualitative studies that have demonstrated the useful contribution this EI ability makes to followers (e.g. Akerjordet and Severinsson, 2004; Clarke, 2006b). It also indicates how relevant EI can be to the relatively unexplored terrain of research into change.

The stress and coping literature indicates how helpful leadership support is to followers in change. It is important here to distinguish between what Robinson and Griffiths (2005)

refer to as *emotional* social support and *instrumental* social support. Although couched in different terms, emotional social support is a feature of EI. Instrumental social support is not a feature of EI, but may be an outcome of it. For example, voicing concern about followers' emotions may be insufficient if leaders have the authority to do something tangible but do not exercise it, like reduce workloads or provide necessary resources. This may account for B's contradictory comment that although her manager was 'the loveliest man' and 'very supportive' he had 'the lowest EQ' because he did nothing about her stressful workload. Similarly, O felt that her boss did understand the emotions of staff but was unwilling or unable to respond to them. In common with the findings of Palmer et al. (2001), our study shows that the leadership quality of individualized consideration is related to the EI ability of responding appropriately to followers' emotions. The role of transformational leadership, especially the capacity to demonstrate individualized consideration, has also been shown to lead to affective commitment (Bono and Judge, 2003) and positive attitudes to change (Kan and Parry, 2004). Literature on authentic leadership (e.g. Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005) also highlights the perceptions of followers of the genuineness of leadership actions. The perceived lack of authenticity of X's supervisor, when she said 'let us say a prayer together' was pivotal to his negative assessment of her leadership ability and EI, and to his resistance to the change.

### *Follower perceptions of leader ability to appropriately express own emotions during change*

Emotion is invested in leader–follower relations to varying degrees and these relationships are often tested under the pressures of organizational change. While it may be difficult for followers to gauge when leaders are controlling their emotions, in particular the negative ones, it is far more noticeable when leaders express negative emotions, such as anger and frustration. The effectiveness of leaders is undermined when they cannot adequately regulate their negative emotions, particularly when they are directed at followers (Newcombe and Ashkanasy, 2002; Waples and Connelly, 2008). Several of our participants commented on their bosses' displays of anger and how these incidents influenced their views of their leaders' effectiveness. There were also those who believed that their bosses felt guilty about delivering unfavourable news and were unable to hide it. For example, D's insight that her boss was too uncomfortable to look at her when discussing her redundancy echoes the findings of Folger and Skarlicki (1999), Clair and Dufresne (2004) and Gandolfi (2008) that managers of downsizing try to reduce their guilt by distancing themselves from their victims.

While our study shows findings similar to those of previous studies, it tends to reveal more of the ambivalence and complexity that Piderit (2000) and Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2005) highlight. A paradox embedded in the relationship between authentic leadership and EI is that authenticity is demonstrated when leaders speak their minds (and their hearts), whereas low EI is often perceived when leaders do not control expressions of negative emotion. It takes considerable ability to manage this tactfully. In Mayer and Salovey's (1997: 11) model the last box contains the highest of all EI abilities, the 'ability to manage emotion in oneself and others by moderating negative emotions and enhancing pleasant ones, without representing or exaggerating any information they may convey'. Our study shows that, in the eyes of their followers, a number of leaders failed to measure up to this challenge.

### *Followers showing/hiding emotions during change*

Some of our respondents reported being comfortable sharing their emotions with their leaders while others kept them tightly reined in. Employees who felt that their emotions were ignored or had been hidden experienced even more negative emotions, and become more resistant to change, as Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2006) and Turnbull (1999) report. One form of emotional labour is the effort people need to exert to curtail emotional expression. This may derive from a host of factors, including individual, professional and organizational influences (Bolton, 2005; Diefendorff and Richard, 2003; Smollan, 2006). Low leader EI may influence followers to conceal their feelings. Q did not appear to be fazed by being told to 'calm' her enthusiasm, because she did not see this as a serious criticism, and it might have been delivered in an appropriate fashion. However, X's need to bottle his negative emotions had a corrosive effect on him. When he did cry in a meeting with his boss, he felt embarrassed and became afraid to voice his opposition to change in other forums. L was both embarrassed and incensed when told that crying in public meant she was too soft. Gender itself can be an issue. In interviewing female leaders, Sachs and Blackmore (1998: 271) found a common theme, articulated by one of their respondents, 'You never show you can't cope. Being in control of your feelings and emotions was important if you wanted to be taken seriously in the job and if you were to be rewarded by promotion.' The ability of leaders to create a safe haven for the expression of followers' emotions is indicative of their EI (Akerjordet and Severinsson, 2004; Clarke, 2006a) and evokes a sense of comfort rather than anxiety or embarrassment in followers. Our study is thus broadly in line with the literature on emotional labour and within the specific context of change – followers who trust their leaders to understand and support them psychologically experience a greater sense of wellbeing and are more able to meet some of the negative and challenging aspects of organizational issues.

### *The model of follower perceptions of change leader EI*

The findings confirm the utility of the model we introduced in Figure 1. Our qualitative study provides evidence of the impact on followers of their leaders' perceived abilities to express and control their own emotions and to respond appropriately to the emotions of the followers. The findings also reveal the complex chain of psychological processes that occurs in leader–follower relationships when an organizational change is introduced and implemented, and which takes place against the history of inter-personal dynamics. For example, leaders might be able to understand followers' emotions, as some of our participants reported, but this does not necessarily mean they have the ability to respond appropriately. If they cannot control their own emotions, particularly when they are directed at followers, their weakness in responding to follower emotions is manifested. The 'cascading model' of EI of Joseph and Newman (2010) lends weight to the view that EI abilities often work in combination. However, the linear approach of their model might not adequately capture the potential complexity of these inter-connected relationships. In addition, account must be taken of a follower's willingness to reveal emotions to a leader. This is predicated on many factors (Bolton, 2005; Smollan, 2006), only some of which lie in the leader–follower relationship (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2006). However, when leaders cannot control their anger, aloofness or guilt, as several of our participants related, followers tend to conceal their own emotions.

A key theme that emerges from both our findings and the literature (e.g. Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005; Parry and Proctor-Thomson, 2002) is the integrity and authenticity with which emotions are handled by leaders. Some of our participants believed they could detect how authentically their leaders were behaving in providing emotional support. Followers' attributions of leader EI are formed when their motives are dissected (Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2002). If a follower believes that a leader is faking sympathy (as our participant X revealed) the outcome is cynicism if not resentment. The lack of sincerity of some of the leaders reported by our participants was a noticeable contributor to the latter's feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction. For a number, it was a telling factor in their decisions to resign.

Another important aspect of our findings is the ambivalence that characterized many of our participants' responses. As Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2005) have found, followers may simultaneously experience positive and negative emotions of varying intensity when faced with leader actions. This is where an interpretivist approach to perceived leader EI is able to uncover the nuances of interpersonal relationships. Many leaders may be reasonably high in one EI ability but not in others. The sub-scales used in the quantitative studies of Jordan and Lawrence (2009) and Wong and Law (2002) also reveal different scores in the various EI abilities. Ambivalent responses of followers can thus be expected.

We can therefore conclude that our findings have provided a clear answer to our research question: How do employees' perceptions of the EI of change leaders influence those employees' own cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions to the change? Followers reacted better to change when they perceived their leaders to be high in the abilities to demonstrate understanding of followers' emotional responses and to express and regulate their own emotions appropriately.

## Limitations and further research directions

While we have investigated follower perceptions of leader EI we have not identified what influences these perceptions, other than leader responses to subordinates' affective reactions to change and the control (or lack thereof) of the leaders' emotions. Therefore, a number of potential explanations merit further study.

First, the role of the followers' EI was not examined, although some followers spoke of their own emotional abilities. As Huy (1999) has theorized and Vakola et al. (2004) have shown, EI is a helpful set of abilities when employees confront change. It is plausible that the ability to recognize an appropriate affective response in another is partly dependent on a person's own EI, as Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) have proposed. Mayer and Salovey (1997: 12) note that 'because emotionally intelligent individuals know about the expression and manifestation of emotion, they are also sensitive to its false or manipulative expression'. This might explain how our participants could judge whether their managers were acting authentically or not when providing psychological support (Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005; Newcombe and Ashkanasy, 2002). However, Côté (2005: 519) suggests that, 'little knowledge exists about when and why observers perceive one emotion when another one is actually displayed.'

In addition, although our study focussed on how followers construct leader responses to follower emotions, it could be suggested that when leaders express strong negative emotions, followers who are emotionally competent tend to judge them as having insufficient emotional

control (Waples and Connelly, 2008). Such followers may find that the leader is oblivious to the emotions that such expression generates in followers. It is interesting to note that a number of our participants used the terms EI or EQ of their own accord (with reference to themselves or their leaders). Therefore those who have read or heard about EI, studied it or been trained in it, may have a heightened perception of what constitutes leader EI and when it is manifested. Thus EI itself can be a socially constructed notion. Further research could explore the relationship between follower EI and perceived and tested leader EI, specifically in a change context.

Second, and as noted in the point above, attributions about others' EI are formed from multiple experiences and discourses. Our interviews focussed on one change experience and did not attempt to fully examine how followers developed perceptions of leader EI. Further qualitative and/or quantitative research could investigate evidence of perceived EI in general organizational settings as well as those that are specifically related to change. In addition, followers' evaluations of leaders are formed not only in dyadic relationships but also from conversations with peers and others. For example, Lamertz (2002) reports that followers' perceptions of the fairness of leaders during change are partly constructed through dialogue with colleagues. Further research into perceived leader EI might be well served by experimental work. Arguments that leadership is socially constructed by followers (e.g. Ford and Lawler, 2007; Grint and Jackson, 2010; Meindl, 1995) lend weight to the view that perceptions of leader EI can be similarly developed through such discourses.

A third potential explanation of our findings is that some personality traits of followers may have influenced how they perceived the emotional responsiveness of their leaders. In this regard, it is important to restate that many models of EI do not adequately distinguish between ability and personality. The differences between these two constructs, and the relationships between them, have been muddled in much of the literature, such as in the mixed models of Bar-On (2006), Dulewicz and Higgs (2000) and others. That said, how EI and personality work separately and in tandem is an area that needs more development. For example, followers with high degrees of cynicism may distrust even those leaders with high EI, while those who are more resilient may not need much leader EI and therefore not notice it. However, exactly which personality traits underpin follower perceptions' of leader EI – and responses to change – needs further empirical investigation.

Fourth, perceptiveness is an ability to see people 'accurately' but perception is highly subjective. Emphasizing a social constructionist approach to leadership, Ford and Lawler (2007: 419) maintain, 'What "exists" are varied, multiple, legitimate interpretations of a situation, rather than a single truth.' It could also be argued that sensory overload, prior experience, stereotyping, self-serving bias and other barriers (Miller and Ross, 1975; Roberson and Kulik, 2007) influence perceptions of leaders by followers. Furthermore, EI is a set of abilities that may have been strengthened through training, coaching and reflective experience (Clarke, 2006b). Mood – at the time of the change or at the time of the interview – may also influence follower perceptions of leader sincerity, as Dasborough and Askansasy (2002) propose. The EI of the follower at the time of the change may also have been different to the EI at the time of the interview and later recall may be different to the experience and management of emotion at the time of the change.

In addition, recall over time might have been undermined for some of our participants who reported on changes that took place more than 10 years before the



interview. Robinson and Clore (2002) note the importance of distinguishing between emotion as it occurs in real time and its reconstruction after a period of time. After events have occurred, people may engage in a cognitive process when they recall emotional episodes, compare them other emotional episodes and their specific contexts and develop more generalized beliefs. With reference to leadership and organizational change, interviewees may resort to belief systems they have developed before and after that event. These facilitate both the recall of the emotions they felt and their evaluations of the EI of the leader.

The day reconstruction method (Kahneman et al., 2004) and diary methods (e.g. Conway and Briner, 2002) provide for a more accurate capturing of affective experiences and beliefs about them. However, although memory *fades* over time, emotion experienced at the time of the change may have been powerful enough to *enhance* memory, as previous research has indicated (e.g. Talarico et al., 2004). Perceptions of leaders are therefore coloured by many factors, including how authentic (Michie and Gooty, 2005) or emotionally intelligent they are believed to be (George, 2000) in one event or over time. The impact of follower perceptiveness and emotional recall, in the context of EI and organizational change, therefore needs further research.

Fifth, although leaders high in EI should be able to detect follower emotion, the hiding of emotion makes it difficult. This may not be an outcome of low leader EI, but rather of follower personality or professional, organizational and national cultures (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003; Lindebaum, 2009; Smollan, 2006). Some of our respondents pointed to the low EI of their leaders while others referred to organizational cultures that constrained emotional expression. While some literature has shown that people high in EI are able to manage emotional labour (e.g. Brotheridge, 2006; Wong and Law, 2002), the context of leader–follower relationships has seldom been explored, let alone in the context of organizational change. Therefore, two fruitful areas for further development include investigating how followers' reactions to change are influenced by contrasting levels of EI in different change leaders and by the affective culture of an organization (George, 2000; Huy, 1999; Menges and Bruch, 2009; Smollan and Sayers, 2009). Using a larger pool of respondents in different countries would also provide a richer stream of material that could highlight the role of ethnicity and nationality in the experience and expression of emotion in organizational settings during change.

Finally, we developed a model that we explored in qualitative fashion. The model lends itself to testing in quantitative ways that could shed further light on the relationships between factors that combine to form follower perceptions of the EI of leaders of change.

## Implications for management

Our study has shown how pivotal perceived leader EI can be to followers' responses to organizational change. Given the importance of EI as one factor influencing follower perceptions of leader effectiveness, researchers have argued that it is important for organizations to choose leaders with high EI and enhance leader EI through appropriate training courses (e.g. Ferres and Connell, 2004; Higgs and Rowland, 2002; Zeidner et al., 2009). However, Groves et al. (2008) have warned that sound EI models need to underpin these courses and that training methods need to be carefully developed and tested. Empirical studies have only recently begun to demonstrate the value of these programmes (e.g. Groves et al., 2008).

General training in EI may not be easily applicable to the specific contexts of different elements of change. Higgs and Rowland (2002) point out that managers with high EI will not require this form of training but may need enhanced leadership skills. It could be argued that training courses in the leadership of change need to incorporate a focus on EI. Given that change is potentially emotional and that leaders and followers respond in idiosyncratic ways, leaders may need to be guided in anticipating and noting follower reactions and responding accordingly. However, there is not only an assumption that training improves performance but that this performance is likely to be consistent. Leaders of change who have been through such courses will not respond well to every challenge. The ambivalent responses of several of our participants revealed that leaders were perceived to have shown varying levels of EI on different occasions. Like those who play sport or music, leaders may not always be 'in form' and on occasion, such as in a change, they may lapse from their normally high standards – or show a surprising and pleasing capacity to 'raise their game'.

Clarke (2006a) also notes that training in EI may not be easily transferred to specific incidents or issues in workplace settings. He further suggests that to maximize its benefits EI training must be integrated with on-the-job training and ongoing development in a supportive environment (Clarke, 2006b). This line of thinking is reinforced by Lindebaum (2009), who warns that EI training will be ineffective if it focusses on organizational benefits without adequately addressing the leaders' needs and organizational culture. Huy (1999) and Menges and Bruch (2009) believe that EI abilities need to be widely diffused for optimum effectiveness. Selection and training alone cannot accomplish this. Appropriate emotional expression needs to become a culturally accepted practice so that change leaders at various levels are able to anticipate follower responses and look for organizational support in dealing with their own and others' emotions. This poses a considerable challenge since many people are not comfortable dealing with emotions and others still believe that they are irrational (see Domagalski, 1999).

Attempting to raise leader EI may be a helpful intervention and not only improve follower responses to change but also enrich leader–follower relations in general. However, leader EI cannot be touted as a panacea for all organizational problems, nor as the best way of enhancing followers' adaptation to change. There are too many facets of organizational change which impact on employees' responses to warrant extravagant claims for the power of leader EI. Nevertheless, the abilities of leaders to read and respond to followers' change-related emotions, and to regulate and express their own emotions, can contribute to more productive change processes.

## Conclusion

We have introduced a follower-centric model and produced evidence of how followers in organizational change have evaluated the emotional expression and regulation of their leaders and their responsiveness to the followers' emotions. We have also shown how these attributions of leader EI have triggered further cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions. While many factors contribute to followers' behavioural responses to organizational change, perceived leader EI can be particularly meaningful. We have thus made a contribution to the literature of EI, leadership and change and introduced a qualitative methodology that has not previously been utilized in this arena of research. The number of ambivalent responses we unearthed is testimony to the complexities and contradictions of follower perceptions of leaders that might not be accessible with quantitative approaches.

Leaders might be higher in some EI abilities than others. We argue that EI, with its many discrete and related abilities, is a key determinant of perceptions of change leadership effectiveness. Effective leaders of change may therefore not simply be those who are entrusted with significant roles in the process. They also need to be sufficiently high in EI that they can engage followers to commit to change and help them manage its challenges. If EI enhances the ability of leaders to facilitate change, training in it appears to be a useful possible intervention, but one that needs to be rigorously designed, implemented and tracked.

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## Appendix: Sample of interview questions

Please describe the change that took place in your organization.

Please describe your emotional reactions to the change.

Did the outcomes have an emotional impact on you?

Did the scale of the change have an emotional impact on you?

Did the frequency of the change have an emotional impact on you?

Did the pace of change have an emotional impact on you?

Did the fairness of the outcomes and processes of change have an emotional impact on you?

Were you expected to show any emotion in the implementation of change?

Were you expected to hide any emotion in the implementation of change?

How did you manage your emotions?

How did the leadership ability of your manager, and more senior managers, affect how you thought, felt and behaved in terms of the change?

Did they know what you thought and what you felt and how did they respond?

These are indicative questions only. The exact wording, and the wording of intervening and supplementary questions, were determined by the direction of the interview and the responses of interviewees. Intervening and supplementary questions related to expanding and giving detail on incidents, processes and the impact of specific people, in particular the perceived ability of leaders to respond to follower emotion and to express their own emotions.