

**Emotional Connections at Work:
The Future of Talent Acquisition and Human Flourishing**

by

Dr. Kerri Cissna, Chief Academic Officer at EmC Leaders, Professor at Miami University

Dr. Charles Gross, Research Manager at EmC Leaders, Professor at Cal State University

Dr. Lene Martin, Researcher at EmC Leaders, Professor at Pepperdine University

Dr. Amanda Wickramasinghe, Researcher at EmC Leaders, Professor at National
University

Introduction: Why Emotional Connections at Work Matter

Diversity, equity and inclusion has grown to be an essential topic for leaders who want to design healthy organizational culture for the 21st century. For several decades organizations have been striving to become more diverse and equitable, but the lack of inclusive environments creates ongoing tension in workplace settings. The role of a modern leader is to create diverse teams that thrive in the context of inclusive environments that are equitable. This study introduces a new method that leaders can apply towards cultivating inclusion through developing emotional connections at work. **Our research on emotional connections (EmC) as the key ingredient for high-performing teams is grounded in attachment theory and positive psychology.** Although many humans have been socialized to leave emotions at home, studies show that emotional intelligence is essential for thriving at work. **An EmC intervention model has been designed to empower leaders to bridge the discomfort of talking about emotions in the workplace, apply the science of attachment theory to workplace ecosystems, and quantify methods for inclusion that lead to human flourishing at work. Emotional connections are the missing puzzle piece for leveraging the potential of high-performing teams.**

The Problem

Organizations are burdened by workplace conflicts. Employees in United States companies spend **approximately 2.8 hours each week involved in conflict** (Hayes, 2008). These conflicts can be very costly. In 2018, there were **76,418 workplace discrimination charges** in the US, which resulted in more than **\$50 million in damages** for victims in federal court (EEOC, 2018). These can also demand a lot of time and energy. **The typical manager spends 25-40% of his/her time dealing with workplace conflicts** (manageconflict.com, 2021). **Fortune 500 senior execs spend 20% in litigation** activities (manageconflict.com, 2021). Workplace conflict is a decisive factor in **50% of employee departures** (manageconflict.com, 2021). Research shows that **60-80% of all difficulties in organizations stem from strained relationships** between employees, not from deficits in individual employee's skill or motivation (Dana, 2005; Kreisman, 2002). The average cost to replace someone is roughly 150% of their annual salary. The emotional connections process is a proactive way to prevent these negative consequences before they arise.

The EmC process helps leaders and employees who wish to work cohesively and collaboratively together, supporting each other's needs, and knowing how to resolve conflict peacefully rather than be in a continuous pattern of negative interactions and disconnections. Research on attachment indicates that if leaders and employees knew how to address emotions in the workplace, they would be able to create safety, re-engage, and be equipped to reconnect people together when the disconnection occurs (Paulssen, 2009). There is a strong connection between psychological safety and high performing teams (Duhigg, 2016). Edmonson (2018) argues that psychological safety needs to be ingrained in organizational cultures in order for them to thrive in the modern economy. In teams, psychological safety describes an interpersonal climate that is characterized by trust and respect, where people feel comfortable expressing their

authentic selves (Edmonson & Roloff, 2009). This notion of psychological safety is a natural byproduct of the EmC process.

Significance of the EmC Process

Human resource professionals predict a turnover tsunami as an influx of people search for new work positions that provide meaning. The COVID-19 pandemic induced many people to pause and reflect on their quality of life at work and to evaluate whether or not they can better contribute their talents in places that will value their contributions. Organizations are currently under scrutiny as the workforce shifts into an era that values human capital more than profits. Employees are searching for positions that align with personal values, where their strengths can be cultivated.

Organizations expect major changes in the workforce as a result of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. McKinsey & Company concluded that organizations should expect a shift “back to human” after the pandemic (Kahn, Komm, Maor, & Pollner, 2021). A study with 71 European Chief Human Resource Officers demonstrates that **90% suggest a shift away from self-service solutions that focus on efficiency towards placing priority on the deepening of relationships**. Leaders are now evaluating which touchpoints employees should experience face-to-face and how to make automated systems feel more “human.” These CHROs said they want to let employees bring their whole self to work by addressing health and wellness and 98% said they will prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion. There were 85% of the CHRO leaders who said workplaces should make agile a reality and empower middle managers to make more independent decisions. COVID-19 revealed that people at all levels need to be prepared to make decisions quickly as there is no longer time to wait for headquarters to respond or share results

from a pilot study. This is great news for employees who want to be trusted and empowered to take part in decision making processes. The study found that 81% of CHRO leaders report HR will expand talent to the entire organizational ecosystem and begin acting as human capitalists. They anticipate more flexibility and less structure around job descriptions and more focus on upskilling the workforce. Upskilling includes working across boundaries and borders and being adaptable.

A Gartner survey revealed that more than 800 human resources leaders across 60 countries and industries identified similar priorities for 2021. This study confirms that **progressive organizations are shifting from an “employee-centered value proposition” to a more human-centered or team-centric-focus by treating employees as people, not just workers (Gartner, 2021).** Findings showed that delivering deeper connections to employees will result in a 28% increase in recommendations of the organization to others. This study also found that by creating radical flexibility, organizations will see a 40% increase in performance. **Organizational focus on personal growth can expect to see a 6% increase in retention.** When a company prioritizes holistic wellness, employees report a 7% increase in physical, financial and mental wellness. There is also an anticipated 9% increase in employees who accept the position when they share in the purpose and/or mission of the organization (Gartner, 2021).

Similar to the results from the McKinsey & Group study, the findings from Gartner (2021) report that employers should have a new imperative to enable employees to be more responsible and engaged in decision making. This distributed model for decision making will require employees to have critical thinking skills and confidence in their ability to contribute to the organizational mission. The Gartner (2021) study revealed that 27% of HR leaders “struggle

to develop effective mid-level leaders” and that the succession planning is not yielding the right leaders at the right time (according to 35% of the HR leaders in the study).

Another finding is that 49% of HR leaders report the leadership bench as lacking diversity (Gartner, 2021). Gartner TalentNeuron collected data from U.S. companies that showed that only 10% of senior-level corporate positions were held by women from a racial or ethnic minority and only 18% were minority men (Gartner, 2021). This could contribute to the lack of trust and confidence employees have towards leaders and managers to navigate crises (44%). The lack of mentors and role models in leadership negatively impacts career advancement of many talented individuals from diverse backgrounds (Gartner, 2021). This further demonstrates a need for a leadership that intentionally creates a pipeline for diversity at all levels. Being inclusive and receptive to new opinions and perspectives will serve organizations well.

A return to more people-centric policies was predicted by Abraham Maslow (1943) who said organizations will shed the compliance/authoritarian ways of leading organizations so that all humans can reach their full potential. He labeled this as self-actualization. Maslow suggested that people who plan on being anything less than they are capable of being will probably be unhappy all the days of life (Maslow, 1943). His suggestion was that enlightened leaders find ways for humans to reach their potential, regardless of position at work or social class. A modern call “back to human” requires us to “imagine if you were to build organizations designed to allow the vast majority of people to self-actualize, to discover and draw upon their true talents and creative passions, and then commit to a relentless pursuit of those activities toward a pinnacle of excellence” (Collins, 2001, p. 131). The Emotional Connection (EmC) process is being introduced as a direct call to action from the predictions that are found in the current HRM landscape.

Background: EmC Process and Purpose

The EmC process was designed to address the gap between human attachment needs and the desire for psychological safety to be cultivated in inclusive workplace environments.

Research shows that employees have more meaningful work experiences when there is a sense of belonging (Gupta, 2017). Interconnectedness leads to a type of social acceptance which creates an attachment and investment in the workplace. The definition of attachment is an emotional connection that creates a bond between people in the workplace (Bowlby, 1969). Popper, Mayseless, and Castelnovo (2000) compared attachment theory to transformational leadership theory and found significant correlations between the two. Attachment theory explains why children attach to figures (mostly parents) to form the basis for whether they feel secure or insecure (Popper et al., 2000). When the child feels secure, they perceive the world positively and when they feel insecure, they perceive the world from a negative perspective. Employees who have access to attachment figures in times of need will feel more motivated and engaged at work (Bowlby, 1979).

Leadership theorists are beginning to see that attachment theory can be applied to the workplace with adults. Attachment theory helps us understand why emotional connections can create a context for psychological safety on high performing teams. This is significant in building a case for emotional connections that help followers feel connected and attached at work. Attachment at work has produced positive outcomes such as work motivation, performance, and ethical behavior (Yip, Ehrhardt, Black, & Walker, 2018). One of the most

fundamental needs that humans have is for a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). As this need is met, humans can then experience flourishing.

People need to feel like they belong at their place of work in order to be at ease with themselves. To do this, employees should be encouraged to share their emotions at work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Emotions become very important in developing relationships with others at work. When employees have insecure bonds with others, they exhibit negative behaviors, yet when they feel secure in their relationships with others, they tend to have positive experiences (Bowlby, 1982).

People feel accepted by employers that utilize emotions to convey that they care more about their team members' personal lives than about the profits that are made at the organization. When people feel valued and emotionally connected, they increase productivity and engagement. The more connected people are to the organization and to each other, the more fulfilled they will feel in life (Gupta, 2017). The ultimate achievement of emotional connections in the workplace is that it leads to human flourishing which affects the common good of humanity and has greater implications for thriving amongst society at large. Emotional connections are also a solution for the cry to make diversity, equity and inclusion a priority for the modern workplace setting.

The Solution: Emotional Connects at Work- How it Works!

The EmC process uses a scientific framework of attachment, emotional connection, and adult bonding to provide a step-by-step structure and specific techniques that address emotions in a safe and appropriate manner, address attachment fears and needs, and create bonding conversations for conflict repair and reconnection. The EmC strategy is centered around the systematic exploration of emotions present during moments of great stress, uncertainty, and

volatility through a proven process that is at once experiential and holistic. Research on attachment theory shows a strong correlation between secure attachment bonds and improved organizational outcomes such as productivity, decision making, creative problem-solving, and trust.

Research on attachment theory shows a strong correlation between secure attachment bonds and improved organizational outcomes such as productivity, decision making, creative problem-solving, and trust. This is the principal difference between conflict resolution and the EmC process, which is aimed at restoring emotional connection and thus securing long-term attachments and rewarding relationships. Hopkins and Yonker (2015) indicate that emotional intelligence abilities are related to how people manage conflicts. And therefore, people should try to improve their emotional intelligence in order to effectively manage conflicts in the workplace. The extant literature on the respective topics is considerable; however, few studies examine the intersection of the different domains. Daniel Goleman's seminal work in leadership explains emotional intelligence (EQ) as consisting of personal competence (self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation) which determines how we manage ourselves, and social competence (empathy and social skills) which determines how we handle relationships (Goleman, 1998). The EmC process builds upon Goleman's emotional intelligence theory by providing a curriculum for leaders to develop these five traits associated with EQ.

Research Design and Evaluation

An ongoing evaluation process has been designed to continuously improve the offerings for developing emotional connections at work. A study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Pepperdine University, which provides authorization to evaluate the

program to provide evidence for the growth and transformation of program participants. While the study is nascent, findings have shown that this program is changing the lives of individuals who are participating in the study. The research uses a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, which involves gathering quantitative data via an online survey, followed by qualitative interviews with a subset of the survey takers. Participants in this research will be asked to take a survey prior to initiating the online EmC course. After completing the course, they will be asked to perform a series of exercises for three weeks and then complete the post-training survey. This pretest/posttest approach will be followed by an optional interview. To complete the study, each participant must (a) take the initial online survey; (b) complete their course; (c) perform prescribed exercises for three weeks; and, (d) retake the online survey. If they provide their consent to be contacted for a voluntary recorded online interview, it will take place after the second survey. Most of the questions (see Appendix A) will solicit the participants' perceptions and reflections about their experience learning and using the course content to improve their emotional responses to workplace conflicts. The approach for the interviews will be explanatory, rather than exploratory, to help interpret and contextualize the results derived from the survey instrument. The data from the second phase of the research is coded and categorized into themes that help explain the survey results. Taken together, the data illuminate aspects of the research problem and dimensions of emotional responses in times of stress than a single-phase could do so independently.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach is well suited for this study as it allows for the lived experiences of individuals to explain quantitative measures and enables multiple avenues for exploring a novel research problem (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the phenomenon is

participating in an online training program (EmC) aimed at improving emotional responses to stressful workplace conflicts. Further, a mixed-methods approach allows the strengths of one approach to mitigate the weaknesses of the other in the pursuit of the study's purpose.

Instrumentation

The quantitative phase will use a combination of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire - short-form (TEIQue-SF) and the Workplace Interpersonal Conflict Scale (WICS). Both surveys use Likert scales; however, while the TEIQue uses a 7-point Likert-self-report scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree," the WICS uses a five-point frequency scale that ranges from "never" to "very often." Combining the 30 items of the TEIQue-SF with the seven items on the WICS will constitute the survey instrument for this study. Additionally, this survey will add demographic questions on (a) employment status; (b) industry of work; and, (c) age group. Participants will have an opportunity to volunteer for a follow-up semi-structured one-on-one online interview, which has five open-ended questions. The interview protocol will provide the researchers with a guide to elicit information from the participants about their experience with the EmC introductory course. The questions center on the participants' experiences both learning and applying the content from the EmC introductory course.

Survey Validity

Research examining the TEIQue-SF shows support for the construct validity of the instrument (Siegling et al., 2015). Similarly, the validity of the WICS was established in a series of studies across organizational settings (Wright et al., 2017). To enhance the validity of the instrument for this study, individuals who match the inclusion criteria but not taking part in the study will test the usability of the instrument. Usability testing is a way to measure how well

subjects use a computer-delivered survey, and it can increase the previously established validity and reliability of a survey (Roe, 2011). Such testing may reveal features that unduly burden or hinder actual participants' delivery of useful data (Geisen & Bergstrom, 2017).

Protocol Validity

This study will employ a four-step process to establish the interview protocol's validity: (a) Prima Facie, (b) Peer Review, (c) Pilot Interview, and (d) Expert Panel to assess and refine the questions that will be posed to interviewees.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative component of the study, in addition to descriptive statistics, a pretest/posttest comparison of the instrument will be used to measure the effects of the intervention. The Power statistical software is used to run all statistical analyses such as T-tests and correlations.

The analysis of the qualitative component employs content analysis on the interview transcripts. After transcribing all interviews, a full reading of each transcript in its entirety, without critique or analysis is completed. Thus immersed in the transcripts, a closer more cautious reading of each transcript follows after the uncritical reading of the transcripts. In the subsequent reading, text appearing to describe an example pertinent to the investigation is highlighted. Additionally, keywords or phrases that seem to convey the interviewees' intent or main idea are written in the margin of the transcript.

After the open coding of enough transcripts to ensure saturation (Saldana, 2013), preliminary codes are established. Then the remaining transcripts can be coded using the preliminary codes. New codes may be created when data that are incompatible with the existing

codes emerge from the transcripts. The process continues until no further codes emerge. Once all transcripts are coded, the codes will be arranged into categories, which may lead to the merger of some codes while others are divided into subcategories. Each code and category will be defined by its examples. After comparison with the literature review, an expert panel (i.e., the research team) will review the themes.

References

- Ashmos, D. P., & Duchon, D. (2000). Spirituality at work: A conceptualization and measure. *Journal of management inquiry*, 9(2), 134-145.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological bulletin*, 117(3), 497.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). The bowlby-ainsworth attachment theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2(4), 637-638.
- Conley, C. (2017). *PEAK: How great companies get their mojo from Maslow revised and updated*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Dana, D. (2005). *Managing Differences: How to Build Better Relationships at Work and Home*. Prairie Mission. *Kans.: Dana Mediation Institute*.
- Duhigg, C. (2016). What Google learned from its quest to build the perfect team. *The New York Times Magazine*, 26(2016), 2016.
- Edmondson, A. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Edmondson, A., & Roloff, K. (2009). Leveraging diversity through psychological safety. *Rotman Magazine*, 1, 47-51.
- Gartner (2021). Gartner for HR: Top 5 priorities for HR leaders in 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources>

Goleman, D. (1998). The emotional intelligence of leaders. *Leader to leader*, 1998(10), 20-26.

Gupta, M. (2017). Corporate social responsibility, employee–company identification, and organizational commitment: Mediation by employee engagement. *Current Psychology*, 36(1), 101-109.

Hayes, J. (2008). Workplace conflict and how businesses can harness it to thrive. *CPP Global Human Capital Report*.

Hopkins, M. M., & Yonker, R. D. (2015). Managing conflict with emotional intelligence: Abilities that make a difference. *Journal of Management Development*.

Kahn, T., Komm, A., Maor, D., & Pollner, F. (2021). Back to human: Why HR leaders want to focus on people again. Retrieved from <https://mck.co/3piXk1I>

Kreisman, B. J. (2002). Insights into employee motivation, commitment and retention. *Business Training Experts: Leadership Journal*, 1-24.

McLeod, S. (2007). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. *Simply psychology*, 1(1-18).

Paulssen, M. (2009). Attachment orientations in business-to-business relationships. *Psychology & Marketing*, 26(6), 507-533.

Popper, M., Maysless, O., & Castelnovo, O. (2000). Transformational leadership and attachment. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11(2), 267-289.

Yip, J., Ehrhardt, K., Black, H., & Walker, D. O. (2018). Attachment theory at work: A review and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(2), 185-198.

About Author:

Dr. Kerri Cissna is the Chief Academic Officer at EmC Leaders and a Visiting Assistant Professor at the Miami University Center for Entrepreneurship. She is passionate about Global Leadership and Change, focusing on the intersection of inclusive leadership and workplace spirituality. Dr. Cissna speaks on leadership, entrepreneurship, and currently is working with the EmC research team to assess the EmC model for creating emotional connections in the workplace.

Dr. Charles Gross is a Research Manager at EmC Leaders. He speaks on leadership, learning theory, and conflict resolution. Before pursuing his doctoral studies, Dr. Gross was a mediator and ultimately a conflict coach. Dr. Gross' research focuses on the development of global leaders and social innovation.

Dr. Amanda Wickramasinghe is a Certified EmC Trainer and serves as a Board Advisor for the EmC Research Team. She is a qualitative researcher, speaker, and educator in the fields of global leadership competencies, global mindset, women's leadership, educational technology, and instructional design. Dr. Wickramasinghe is a board member of the International Center for Global Leadership and is an active member of the International Leadership Association.

Dr. Lene Martin is the founder and director of the Blockchain at Pepperdine program at Pepperdine University and teaches blockchain business applications and analytics at the Pepperdine Graziadio Business School. As a Norwegian-American scholar, her research agenda focuses on Nordic leadership models of economic growth, prosperity, and sustainability, specifically the convergence of emerging technology strategies and corporate social responsibility standards.

About EmC Leaders:

EmC Leaders is a training and consulting firm helping organizations drive performance through the power of emotional connection. We help build resilience, enhance emotional intelligence, and enable growth. Emotional Connection (EmC) is a proprietary and unique strategy based on the well-documented science of attachment and emotions essential to helping humans feel safe and sound. Using the EmC strategy, we help teams invigorate creativity and collaboration, boost engagement and wellness, build psychological safety to enhance trust and authenticity, and nurture leadership to foster strong relationships, creating thriving cultures. For more information, please visit www.emcleaders.com.

To learn more, please check out our book, [Emotional Connection - The EmC Strategy](#), an effective map into unlocking human potential, building resilient teams, and nurturing thriving cultures.