

Executive Insights

When is high IQ a liability for an executive?

Korn Ferry research shows that self-awareness determines whether a very high IQ improves leadership performance or hurts it. Assessment data from 209 managers and executives suggests that if two executives have high self-awareness, the one with the high IQ will be the better performer. But among those with low self-awareness, the reverse is true.

Measures of general intelligence (IQ) have a long and controversial history. Most experts today agree on a few things: IQ is measurable; it stabilizes as early as age 5; and it is predictive of many positive outcomes, including educational and financial attainment. In popular culture, though, hyper intelligence is frequently linked to social awkwardness. The image of the exceptionally smart person who lacks common sense and can't relate to people is a staple of TV and movies.

For better or worse, this stereotype has some basis in reality: scientific findings repeatedly have noted that at very high ranges, IQ tends to be inversely related to strong social and interpersonal skills (Gross 2002).

Given that interpersonal skills are crucial in the workplace, might markedly high IQ be a problem—particularly in high-level management? A number of articles, research findings, and blogs would have us believe so. *Fast Company* magazine (Azzarello 2012), for example, suggested that the high-IQ executive doesn't listen well and can frustrate his or her team. Direct reports grow weary of asking for additional explanation; the "smart executive" grows resentful of needing to hold the hands of employees. Mael (2005) also suggests that often the very intelligent executive is markedly ineffective, in part because of tendencies to grow impatient, to "always be right," and to refuse to "leave room for others to be smart as well."

Despite such assertions, analysis of data from Korn Ferry's assessments of upper level executives reveals no evidence of leaders being "too smart." High IQ executives tend to be high performers, and the positive effect associated with IQ does not plateau. Some researchers agree with our verdict, finding a positive and even substantial effect on performance (Hunter and Hunter 1984), though others suggest that (within normal IQ ranges), IQ has little effect on executive performance (Sternberg 1997; Fernandez-Araoz 2001; Emmerling and Goleman 2003).

So to some extent the jury remains out on IQ. Does it have a positive effect? Negative? Is the effect only trivial? Why the inconsistent findings?

We at the Korn Ferry Institute hypothesized that whether a high IQ is an asset or a liability depends on the individual's social-emotional makeup. We secured data on 209 upper level managers and executives to test our hypothesis. Each person had completed a comprehensive executive assessment that included a leadership performance simulation, and measures of IQ and self-awareness.¹

Self-awareness—which involves insight into one's own behavior, strengths, motives, and weaknesses—is a primary component of emotional intelligence and is highly correlated with interpersonal skills. Self-aware executives understand the effect they have on other people and regulate their emotions and social behavior accordingly (Herwig, Kaffenberger, Jäncke, and Brühl 2010). They are more likely to be socially skilled and appropriately empathetic, and thus unlikely to display the impatience, poor listening, and related resentment noted in the blogs and articles about high IQ executives.

Statistical analyses confirmed our hypothesis. High IQ improves executive performance for those with elevated levels of self-awareness. *For those whose self-awareness is low, increased IQ becomes a liability and detriment to managerial performance.*

Stated differently, an organization can expect better leadership performance from an executive with low self-awareness and an average IQ than from one with low self-awareness and a high IQ (see Figures 1-3).

Our results fall in line with well-established research tying strong social-emotional abilities (within average to high IQ level populations) with positive managerial performance. What is novel about our finding is that self-awareness actually appears to moderate whether high IQ is a positive or negative for business leaders.

In fact, self-awareness seems to matter more than intelligence. Unlike IQ, it shows an unqualified positive relationship with performance. This isn't surprising: other studies of leadership performance have found that social-emotional factors have up to twice the impact of IQ (Goleman 1998; Womenetics 2014). Moreover, self-awareness—unlike IQ—seems to be malleable even well into adulthood (Davidson, Jackson, and Kalin 2000). Growth in self-awareness, then, is a potent development opportunity for those aspiring to the C-suite. It not only leads to more effective management generally, but also brings out the positive aspects of other characteristics in executives—including high IQ.

¹ In this research, self-awareness was measured using scales from SHL Talent Measurement's Global Personality Inventory (GPI), owned by CEB.

Figure 1

Executive performance across IQ and self-awareness levels.

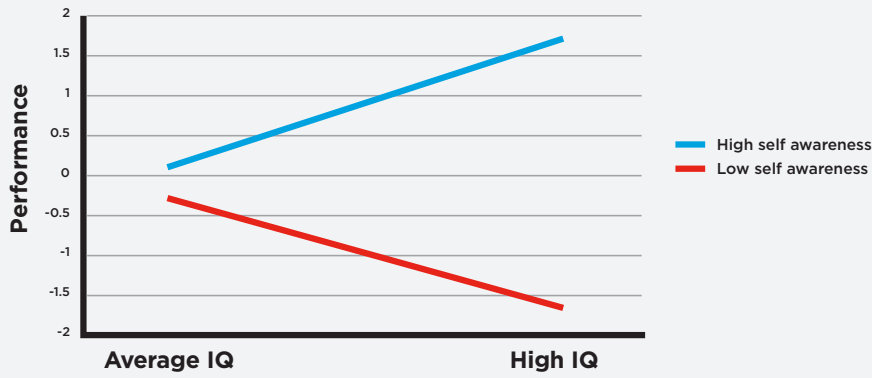


Figure 2

The relationship between IQ and managerial performance among executives with low self awareness.

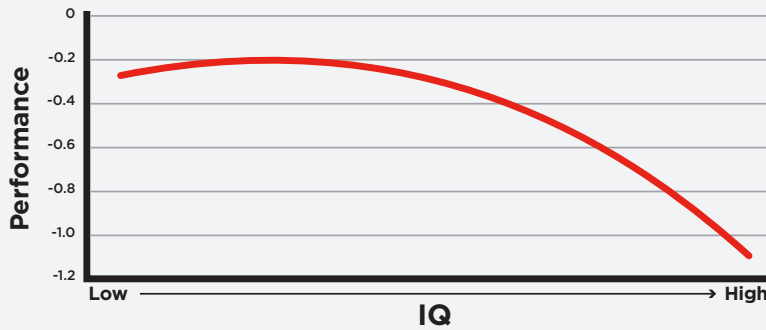
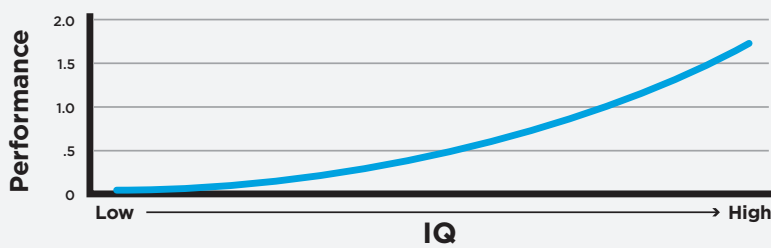


Figure 3

The relationship between IQ and managerial performance among executives with high self awareness.



References

Azzarello, Patty. 2012. "You Can't Be Effective When You're Too Smart for Your Own Good." *FastCompany.com*. Aug. 16. Retrieved May 9, 2014. <http://www.fastcompany.com/3000430/you-cant-be-effective-when-youre-too-smart-your-own-good>.

Davidson, Richard J., Daren C. Jackson, and Ned H. Kalin. 2000. "Emotion, Plasticity, Context, and Regulation: Perspectives From Affective Neuroscience." *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (6): 890-909.

Fernandez-Araoz, Claudio. 2001. "The Challenge of Hiring Senior Executives." In *The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace*, edited by C. Cherniss and Daniel Goleman, 182-206. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Goleman, Daniel. 1998. *Working With Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Gross, Miraca. 2002. "Social and Emotional Issues for Exceptionally Intellectually Gifted Students." In *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?* edited by Maureen Neihart, Sally Reis, Nancy Robinson, and Sidney Moon, 19-30. Waco, Texas: Prufrock Press.

Herwig U., T. Kaffenberger, L. Jäncke, and A.B. Brühl. 2010. "Self-Related Awareness and Emotion Regulation." *NeuroImage* 50 (2): 734-41.

Hunter, John E., and Ronda F. Hunter. 1984. "Validity and Utility of Alternative Predictors of Job Performance." *Psychological Bulletin* 96 (1): 72-98.

Mael, Fred. 2005. "The Too Smart CEO." *Washington SmartCEO*. November. Retrieved May 11, 2014. <http://www.maelconsulting.com/2011/03/the-too-smart-ceo/>.

Sternberg, Robert J. 1997. *Successful intelligence*. New York: Plume.

Womenetics. 2014. "EI Trumps IQ in the C-Suite." March 23. Retrieved May 5, 2014. <https://www.womenetics.com/Article/ArtMID/2681/ArticleID/2575/Robin-Ross-Emotional-Intelligence>.

About the author



James Lewis, PhD
Director of Research, Korn Ferry Institute

About Korn Ferry

At Korn Ferry, we design, build, attract and ignite talent. Since our inception, clients have trusted us to help recruit world-class leadership. Today, we are a single source for leadership and talent consulting services to empower businesses and leaders to reach their goals. Our solutions range from executive recruitment and leadership development programs, to enterprise learning, succession planning and recruitment process outsourcing (RPO).

About The Korn Ferry Institute

The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books and a quarterly magazine, Briefings, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth and success.

Visit www.kornferry.com for more information on Korn Ferry, and www.kornferryinstitute.com for articles, research and insights.