



EMPOWERME™ WHITE PAPER · A NEW DEFINITION FOR THE FIELD

Defining Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence

Extending Salovey and Mayer's framework to the pressures of building something new: ownership, uncertainty, and responsibility.

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EmpowerMe™

Mental and emotional strength for people who build things.

Success is not empowerment if it costs you yourself.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Founders need an account of emotional intelligence built for the conditions they work under. This paper proposes one. It defines Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence by keeping Salovey and Mayer's original 1990 framework intact and adding the three pressures that set the founder's emotional life apart: ownership of an unproven idea, sustained uncertainty, and responsibility for the people and resources committed to it.

Research on entrepreneurial affect and founder mental health supports treating these pressures as part of the construct, not as background. The paper closes with implications for founders, educators, and practitioners, and introduces the EmpowerMe™ model and EmpowerMe™ Therapy, which develops these skills through Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence training.

Why founders need their own account of emotional intelligence

Most founders do not arrive saying they lack emotional intelligence. They say they are getting lost: in uncertainty that never lets up, in the weight of everyone depending on them, in a company that has quietly become who they are.

Founders use emotional intelligence under conditions most of the research never studied. The field grew out of questions about how people perceive and manage feelings in ordinary life and inside established organizations. A founder works in neither. The idea is their own, the outcome is unknown, and other people's livelihoods depend on how steady they stay.

I teach emotional intelligence at the Chesapeake School of Business, and I work clinically with founders. In both rooms I see the same gap. Students learn a strong general model of EI, then go out to build companies and meet pressures that model was never shaped around. Founders arrive in my office with high general EI and still feel undone by the work, because the pressure is aimed at the exact capacities EI describes.

Origins: Salovey and Mayer's framework

Emotional intelligence entered the scientific literature in 1990, when Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer published “Emotional Intelligence” in *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*. They placed it within social intelligence and described it as the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings, distinguish among them, and use that information to guide thinking and action (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189).

The 1990 paper organized emotional intelligence into three sets of skills:

- **Appraisal and expression** of emotion, in oneself and in others.
- **Regulation** of emotion, in oneself and in others.
- **Utilization** of emotion: using feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve.

The paper also connected emotional intelligence to mental health, suggesting that people less skilled at these abilities may be more prone to distress (Mayer et al., 2008). That link matters for founders, whose work places heavy and sustained demands on every one of these skills.

In 1997, Mayer and Salovey refined the framework into the four-branch ability model: perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitate thought, understanding emotion, and managing emotion. The definition proposed here returns to the 1990 structure because its three skill areas, and its emphasis on emotion in oneself and others, map directly onto what a founder must do every day.

Why the founder's context is different

Entrepreneurship research has established that emotion is central to how founders think, decide, and act. Baron (2008) proposed that affect shapes key parts of the entrepreneurial process, including opportunity recognition and resource acquisition. Cardon and colleagues later described entrepreneurial emotion as a major and growing area of study (Cardon et al., 2012).

A systematic review of affect and entrepreneurship explains why emotion runs so high in this population: founders personally identify with their ventures and constantly face the unknown, so strong positive and negative emotions are built into the work (Delgado-García et al., 2015). The same review notes that affect has the most influence on cognition when tasks are complex, unfamiliar, and require effortful thinking. That describes most of a founder's day.

72% of entrepreneurs in Freeman and colleagues' study reported mental health concerns, well above a comparison group (Freeman et al., 2019).

The mental health research points the same direction. In a study of 242 entrepreneurs and 93 comparison participants, Freeman and colleagues found higher rates of depression, ADHD, and substance use conditions among entrepreneurs (Freeman et al., 2019). A scoping review of 34 studies on depression among entrepreneurs identified time demands, social isolation, relationship strain, and feelings of failure and shame as recurring themes. It also found that stigma and the need to project a confident public image can keep founders from seeking help (Cubbon et al., 2021).

Taken together, these findings describe a person whose emotional skills are under constant, specific load. General EI frameworks describe the skills. They do not describe the load. Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence names both.

The three founder pressures

Three conditions set the founder's emotional life apart: ownership, uncertainty, and responsibility. Each is documented in research, and each places specific demands on the skills Salovey and Mayer described.

1. Ownership: the idea is mine

Psychological ownership is the feeling that something is “mine,” whether or not a person legally owns it. Pierce et al. (2001) defined the construct and later proposed that one of its roots is self-identity: people come to experience what they own as part of who they are (Pierce et al., 2003). For a founder, the venture began as their own idea, so ownership runs unusually deep. Shepherd's work on business failure found that losing a venture can produce grief comparable to other significant losses (Shepherd, 2003).

In clinical practice, I see this as identity fusion between founder and company. When the idea is criticized, the founder feels personally attacked. When the company struggles, their sense of worth struggles with it. Entrepreneurial EI asks founders to appraise that response accurately: to tell the difference between a threat to the business and a threat to the self.

2. Uncertainty: no map and no guarantee

Uncertainty is central to entrepreneurship theory. McMullen and Shepherd (2006) modeled entrepreneurial action as a function of how much uncertainty a person perceives and how willing they are to bear it. Research on fear of failure shows that it is a recurring emotional response to this uncertainty, shaping whether and how founders act (Cacciotti et al., 2016).

Employees work inside structures that absorb some uncertainty for them: a manager, a job description, a paycheck. Founders build those structures while working without them. Entrepreneurial EI asks founders to regulate fear and excitement well enough to keep thinking clearly, and to use emotion as information when data is missing.

3. Responsibility: others depend on my steadiness

A founder's emotional state does not stay private. Barsade's research on emotional contagion showed that one person's mood spreads through a group and changes how the group cooperates and performs (Barsade, 2002). In a startup, the founder is often the most emotionally influential person in the room. Investors, employees, customers, and the founder's own family are all affected by how the founder carries the weight.

Founders manage this weight in different ways, and their coping strategies affect their well-being (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Uy et al., 2013). Social ties can buffer the effects of economic stress on founders' mood and their intention to quit (Pollack et al., 2012). In practice, I often see founders who appease investors or hide their own strain to protect their teams, a pattern that resembles the fawn response. Entrepreneurial EI asks founders to express emotion honestly and appropriately, and to regulate emotion in others without abandoning themselves.

A note on balance

These pressures are not only harmful. A large representative study found that entrepreneurs reported better health than employees on several measures (Stephan & Roesler, 2010), and some researchers argue that traits linked to psychiatric conditions can be advantages in entrepreneurship (Wiklund et al., 2018). The same pressures that deplete one founder can strengthen another. Emotional intelligence is a strong candidate for what makes the difference.

The definition

ENTREPRENEURIAL EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence is the ability to appraise, express, regulate, and use emotion in oneself and others under the particular pressures of building something new: personal ownership of an unproven idea, sustained uncertainty, and responsibility for the people and resources committed to it.

The first half of the definition keeps Salovey and Mayer’s 1990 structure intact: appraisal and expression, regulation, and use of emotion, in oneself and in others. The second half names the conditions under which founders must use those skills. The contribution is the pairing. It treats the founder’s context as part of the construct, not as background.

FOUNDER PRESSURE	WHAT IT PRODUCES	EI SKILL TESTED MOST
Ownership of an unproven idea	Identity fused with the venture; criticism felt as personal threat	Appraising one’s own emotion accurately
Sustained uncertainty	Fear of failure, excitement, and decisions made without full data	Regulating emotion and using it as information
Responsibility for people and resources	Emotional contagion across the team; pressure to appear steady	Expressing emotion honestly and regulating emotion in others

Table 1. The three founder pressures and the EI skills they test most. In practice, every pressure tests every skill.

Implications

For founders, the definition offers a way to see strain as a predictable result of the role, not a personal failing. Ownership, uncertainty, and responsibility are built into the work. The question is whether a founder has the skills to carry them.

For educators, it suggests that entrepreneurship programs teach emotional skills in the context where students will use them. General EI instruction is a strong foundation. Founders also need practice applying it to the three pressures.

For practitioners, including clinicians, coaches, and accelerator staff, it offers a shared vocabulary for what they already see in founders. It also points to a research agenda: measuring Entrepreneurial EI directly and testing whether it predicts founder well-being and venture outcomes.

The EmpowerMe™ model and EmpowerMe™ Therapy

The EmpowerMe™ model is the model for Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence and the foundation of EmpowerMe™ Therapy. It organizes more than 20 evidence-based therapeutic approaches into four phases drawn from Salovey and Mayer's work: See Yourself, Be Yourself, See Others, and Be With Others. The first two phases build a founder's capacity to appraise and regulate their own emotions. The last two extend those skills to the people who depend on them. Each founder pressure has a home in the model: ownership calls first on See Yourself, uncertainty on Be Yourself, and responsibility on See Others and Be With Others.

EmpowerMe™ Therapy is delivered as Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence training. At its center is the journal workout: guided journaling founders add to their business routine, the way they would train with a coach at the gym to build physical strength.

WHY EMPOWERME

Business coaching understands the pressure but not the person. Traditional therapy understands the person but not the pressure. EmpowerMe™ Therapy brings evidence-based therapeutic approaches to the unique pressures of building something, and makes them trainable.

Business or Self?

This workout trains the skill the ownership pressure tests most: appraising your own emotion accurately. Set aside ten minutes and write by hand if you can.

- 1 Recall a recent moment when your business was criticized, stalled, or struggled. Write what happened, facts only.

- 2 Name what you felt, as precisely as you can. Where did you notice it in your body?

- 3 Sort it. What part of this was a threat to the business? What part felt like a threat to you: your worth, your competence, who you are?

- 4 Finish this sentence: "Whatever happens with this business, it remains true that I ..."

Success is not empowerment if it costs you yourself.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Keep training with us. Join the EmpowerMe community at skool.com/empower-me for journal workouts, conversation with other founders, and first access to *EmpowerMe 101: Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence*.

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Four phases of Entrepreneurial Emotional Intelligence

The foundation of EmpowerMe™ Therapy, organizing more than 20 evidence-based therapeutic approaches.

PHASE 1

See Yourself

Appraising your own emotions accurately.

PHASE 2

Be Yourself

Regulating and expressing them under pressure.

PHASE 3

See Others

Reading the emotions of the people who depend on you.

PHASE 4

Be With Others

Leading and relating without abandoning yourself.

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