

## The No. 1 Skill Eric Adams Is Looking For (It's Not on a Résumé)

The mayor-elect of New York City wants his top officials to be emotionally intelligent, characterizing it as his “No. 1 criteria.”



By Dana Rubinstein

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When Eric Adams was looking for someone to lead the nation's largest police force, he considered some of the typical credentials, like relevant work experience and educational attainment. But he ranked another trait high on that list: “emotional intelligence.”

When he named David Banks as chancellor of the nation's largest school system, Mr. Adams suggested that Mr. Banks exemplified emotional intelligence, something he argued would gird the new schools chief for the “battle” ahead. And when he named someone on Thursday to run New York City's troubled jail system, he again said his pick, Louis Molina, was “emotionally intelligent.”

Mr. Adams, the mayor-elect of New York City, says that attribute is a prerequisite to winning a job in the highest echelons of city government. It is a phrase that Mr. Adams said New Yorkers should get used to hearing — a term that, divorced from its academic underpinnings, is something akin to “people skills.”

With less than three weeks before he takes office, Mr. Adams must still fill the vast majority of his top administration posts. But he has been consistent in arguing that those ranks must be filled by the “emotionally intelligent,” deliberately downplaying more commonplace credentials, like academic achievement and government experience.

“No. 1 criteria, I say this over and over again and some people don't hear it: emotional intelligence,” Mr. Adams said on Election Day, referring to his qualifications for first deputy mayor. “We hire people based on their academics, we look at their degrees. We look at their prior experience. No one understands the impact of just being emotionally intelligent and really understanding the compassion of people and what they are going through.”

“If you don't understand going through Covid, losing your home, living in a shelter, maybe losing your job, going through a health care crisis, if you don't empathize with that person, you will never give them the services that they need,” he added.

Emotional intelligence is a notion rooted in the academic work of psychologist Peter Salovey, now the president of Yale University, and John D. Mayer, now a professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire. Professor Mayer has described emotional intelligence as the “ability to accurately perceive your own and others' emotions; to understand the signals that emotions send about relationships; and to manage your own and others' emotions.”

But the phrase did not enter the realm of pop psychology until 1995, when the psychologist Daniel Goleman, then a New York Times science reporter, propagated the concept in his book “Emotional Intelligence.” That same year, Time magazine ran a cover story on the concept, arguing that “emotional intelligence may be the best predictor of success in life.”

Mr. Adams has long evinced disdain for New York's establishment elite, which is predominantly white and centered in Manhattan and brownstone Brooklyn, and its definition of what success looks like. His reliance on the unconventional-for-government “emotional intelligence” metric reflects the outlook of a Black man who grew up in a working-class environment in Queens, rising from police captain to state senator, to Brooklyn borough president and then mayor-elect.

“Don't tell me about your Ivy League degrees,” he said this month, when appointing Mr. Banks schools chancellor. “Don't tell me about where you went to school and how important you think you are. Don't tell me about what you are going to do because of your philosophical theories on understanding children. I don't want to hear about your academic intelligence. I want to know about your emotional intelligence.”



In naming David Banks, center, the city's new schools chancellor, Eric Adams, left, said he valued emotional intelligence over academic intelligence. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

The concept and importance of emotional intelligence has continued to spark serious academic study, even as it has influenced management theory. It has also spawned a cottage industry of consultants purporting to be experts in the measurement of a person's "emotional quotient," a related concept. Some critics argue that the idea has devolved into a "self-help doctrine."

David R. Caruso, a psychologist who specializes in the study of emotional intelligence and has worked with Professors Mayer and Salovey, said it has gotten to the point where a person's definition of emotional intelligence has become a Rorschach test.

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"When you ask people, 'What does that mean and how do you hire to that?' that's where folks slow down and either don't answer or really indicate what they mean," he said. "And even if they say 'people skills,' what is that? In our work, we're pretty explicit."

On Thursday, after highlighting the concept on Bloomberg TV, "The Brian Lehrer Show" and in The Daily News, Mr. Adams offered his own extended definition.

"My criteria for those who are coming into my office is that they must be able to manage their emotion, manage how they handle themselves, be able to interact with the very difficult environment that they are about to encounter," Mr. Adams said.

In an email, Mr. Caruso said Mr. Adams's response was "one of the best lay definitions I've seen!"

But Mr. Caruso also cautioned that managing emotions does not mean repressing them, so much as channeling them into constructive behaviors.

"It can be helpful and productive to be sad at times so you focus on details or comfort those who have experienced a loss, unfortunately a part of being chief of police or mayor," he said. "It can be helpful to have anxiety to motivate you."

It is desirable for executives to hire individuals who exhibit evidence of emotional intelligence, according to Mr. Caruso and Mr. Goleman.

“There’s now a large body of research showing that this skill set has positive impacts on a leader’s ability to get the best performance, to keep people engaged, and to set a positive mood,” Mr. Goleman said.

Evan Thies, a spokesman for Mr. Adams, declined to say how the incoming administration was screening for emotional intelligence.

Three people on Mr. Adams’s transition team said they were unaware of the circulation of any particular materials about the concept.

There are assessment tools to measure emotional intelligence, Mr. Caruso said, though they are rarely used in hiring. More commonly, interviewers ask questions designed to elicit signs of emotional intelligence.

They might ask, for example, for people to describe a time they were surprised by someone else’s reaction, or to consider a significant interpersonal conflict that they have experienced professionally, and to describe who was involved, how it made them feel, how others felt, and the like.

Since job applicants are primed to perform, Mr. Goleman recommended speaking confidentially to individuals who have worked with the person in the past.

On Thursday, at the news conference where he introduced Mr. Molina as his pick for correction commissioner, Mr. Adams suggested emotional intelligence might also mean anticipating the new mayor’s own needs.

As he was speaking, one of his aides brought him a bottle of water.

“That was a very emotionally intelligent action you just did,” Mr. Adams said to the aide, smiling. “He saw that my voice was hoarse.”

Nicholas Fandos contributed reporting.

### What to Know: Emotional Intelligence



But what does that mean?

Here’s a handy primer →

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