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Olaf Kraak/EPA

Celtic's Neil Lennon: how a hothead player found emotional intelligence as a manager

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Once he was unpredictable and volatile, easy for opposing fans to wind up and quick to lose his temper on the pitch. These days, as Celtic's manager, Neil Lennon is a much calmer, mellower figure who seems more comfortable in his own skin.

Crucially, he's a man who's developed emotional intelligence in a profession where other managers refuse – or perhaps feel unable – to do the same. But as another highly competitive Premiership kicks off in Scotland, embracing emotional intelligence may be the smart move for managers seeking to motivate expensive players and propel their teams to success.

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What is emotional intelligence (EI) and why does it matter in football? It can be understood as a person's capacity to recognise and manage their own and others' emotions. It's what enables us to think rationally before acting, so that we find more logical solutions to problems and make better decisions when engaged in emotional activities, of which football is undoubtedly one.

This is why a manager's lack of emotional intelligence or people skills – rather than poor tactics or ineffective training – can sometimes be more deserving of blame when things go wrong on the pitch. But there is hope for the emotionally challenged gaffer.

In a study that involved attending several months of EI training, sports coaches reported feeling more skilled in their use of adaptive strategies to regulate their emotions. They also attested to improved relationships and enhanced personal performance.



An angry Lennon argues with the referee in a game against Rangers in 2005. Ian Stewart/EPA

Turning over a new leaf

These results, alongside wider research, suggest that EI can be learned. For added inspiration, consider how the public actions of the “new” Neil Lennon in comparison with others (including his old self) illustrate some of the characteristics and value of EI in football management.

Smart managing

When we consider a manager's ability to create an emotional atmosphere for players, an interesting parallel can be drawn between the sight of an apoplectic Lennon during a loss to Inverness Caledonian Thistle in 2011, and a dejected Gerrard during a loss to Hamilton Academical in 2020 at the end of what were runner-up seasons for both managers.

Does such a comparison present a lifeline for Gerrard's ambitions to win trophies at Rangers and perhaps one day at Liverpool? As far as continued personal development (CPD) activities go, Gerrard could do worse than study the emotional brilliance of Liverpool's current boss, Jürgen Klopp, whose personal and relational skills were instrumental in the Reds recently returning to English top flight glory after a 30-year dry spell.

But is EI really that important for winning? After all, Lennon won five trophies in his first spell at Celtic despite his volatile nature. And Tottenham Hotspur's manager, José Mourinho, is one of the most explosive yet decorated managers of all time.



Jurgen Klopp is admired for his emotionally intelligent approach to management. Tim Keeton/EPA

Still, the Portuguese manager's troublesome habit for "losing the dressing room" prompts admiration for Lennon's current behaviour, similar to that of Klopp when his team lost the Champions League final in 2018. Both have the ability to offer a potential solution for when things don't go exactly as planned.

These days football managers are fired quickly if they don't produce results, and have to deal with multi-million pound players who are becoming increasingly powerful. So erratic and unempathetic behaviour in the hot seat has never been more risky.

Gone might be the days of successful managers regularly giving players the "hairdryer treatment" made famous by the legendary former Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson. A gentler, more calculating and emotionally controlled approach may now be required.

Lennon is still flawed at times, as his recent spurning of a player for getting injured proves, but these days he thinks as much as he feels, making him a more effective leader. Anyone wishing to develop emotional intelligence would do well to heed the advice Lennon wishes he could have given his younger self: "Calm down. You can't do everything yourself. Take a step back and smell the roses."

Football Empathy Emotional Intelligence Sir Alex Ferguson Celtic Jurgen Klopp

Near the beginning of Lennon's second and current term as Celtic boss, the club suffered a shock defeat by Romanian club Cluj, sending them crashing out of the Champions League qualifiers. Lennon, while bitterly disappointed, made far more controlled comments about his team's errors than he did as interim manager when Celtic lost to Ross County in the 2009-10 Scottish Cup semi-final. Here, Lennon questioned players' character and even suggested that some should be sold.

At another point in the 2019-20 season, Celtic suffered a second surprise European loss, this time at the hands of FC Copenhagen in the Europa League final-32 knock-out phase. Lennon insisted that nobody would be made a scapegoat and praised his team's collective efforts over the course of a group-winning campaign.

By emphasising and acknowledging players' hard work, Lennon provided them with evidence of their success, seemingly in the hopes of promoting unity and minimising feelings of disappointment within the team. As a manager he also showed an understanding of how less pleasant emotions can be leveraged to produce positive results, when he asked players not to forget the loss completely so that it could motivate them to win their next match, which they did.

Lennon admits Celtic shot themselves in the foot after shock Eu...



More emotional astuteness was revealed when Rangers beat Celtic to cut the gap at the top of the Scottish Premiership to two points with a game in hand going into the midway break in late 2019. Despite likely feeling under enormous pressure to deliver a record-equalling ninth consecutive league title, Lennon called for calm, in a reaction that demonstrated an awareness of the infectious nature of emotions (technically known as the **emotional contagion effect**).

Lennon's positive emotional role-modelling surely helped his team bounce back from the upset and go undefeated for the rest of the season, finishing as champions 13 points ahead of a Rangers team that seemed to capitulate under pressure from fans – and perhaps, tellingly, their manager Steven Gerrard – following a string of poor results.