Emotional intelligence activities: notice, name and choose practice for work

Emotional intelligence activities at work are most useful as practice with words and ordinary moments, not as a test. This kit gives you a 60-minute session for pairs with 36 emotion-word cards, six fictional work moments, a notice, name and choose sheet and filled examples. It measures nothing, nobody has to share their own feelings, and it is not therapy.

60 minutes | 4–20 participants | Online and adaptable in person

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The outcome

By the end of 60 minutes each participant has ordered one family of emotion words and compared it with a partner, and has worked through two fictional work moments: facts apart from guesses, up to three possible words, and a chosen response with its first sentence.

Before the session

- For trainers and team leads running communication sessions at work: 4–20 people in pairs.
- Read “When this practice is the wrong tool” first. Do not run the session just after a distressing event in the team, or in an appraisal or selection process.
- Print a card set per pair, the moment cards, and per person the ladder, practice and choose sheets.
- Accessibility: offer plain-text cards, a written route and passing without a reason.

Included in this kit

A facilitator run of show, participant worksheets with real tables, reference tables, debrief questions, adaptation notes and a follow-up plan. Use the editable Word copy to tailor examples and prompts before delivery.

Original material by Superglue. Timings are suggestions; adjust them to your participants. This resource has not been independently evaluated.

What is inside

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When this practice is the wrong tool

Read this page first. This kit is skills practice with words and fictional work moments. It is not therapy, counselling or an assessment, and it measures nothing. The situations below need something else. This is a guide for trainers, not HR, legal or medical advice; follow your organisation's policy and local law.

Situation	Where it belongs	Why it is not for this practice
Someone in the room is distressed, or says they are not coping	Pause the activity for everyone. Afterwards, offer a private word and point to the support your organisation has, such as an employee assistance programme. In immediate danger, call the emergency services.	Word cards and practice are not support for a person who is struggling.
Grief, trauma or a mental health condition	A qualified professional, chosen by the person	This is skills practice, not therapy or counselling.
Judging a colleague's emotional intelligence, in an appraisal, hiring or promotion	Nowhere. Do not use this kit for it.	The kit measures nothing. Its tallies count words heard in one practice round.
A performance or conduct concern about a person	The manager and the agreed HR process	A concern about a person needs a fair process, not an exercise in reading them.
A real tension between two people in the room	A private conversation, the manager, or the conflict resolution activities kit with fictional cards	Practising on a real colleague in public can hurt the relationship.
Asking people to share their own feelings in the group	Never required. Sharing is optional, and the choose card stays private.	Disclosure at work cannot be undone, and nobody should feel obliged.

Notice, name, choose: the three steps

A simple order for an ordinary work moment, written for this kit. It is not a validated model and promises no result.

Step	What you do	Words you could use
1. Notice	Separate what you can see or hear from what you guess. Facts first: words, actions, timing, your own body. Then the guess, marked as a guess. Ask: what exactly was said or done, and what am I adding?	"The phone went down hard and they said 'Unbelievable'." "My guess is that the call went badly."
2. Name	Pick one to three words from the cards that might fit, and the signal behind each. Ask: is it milder or stronger than my first word? About someone else, a word stays a guess; do not say it to them as a fact.	"Not furious. Closer to exasperated, because of the hard phone. Maybe strained, if the call added work."
3. Choose	Weigh two or three responses and what each might lead to. Choose one and say its first sentence. Ask: what do I want to happen next? About someone else, check or offer; do not tell them what they feel.	"That sounded like a tough call. I need your sign-off by 15:00. Is now all right, or would 14:00 suit you better?"

Emotion-word cards

One set per pair. Cut along the lines, or use the page as it is. Each column is one family, printed in alphabetical order, not in order of strength. The last row is blank for words of your own.

Pressure	Frustration	Worry	Let-down	Interest	Satisfaction
busy	angry	alarmed	deflated	curious	content
overwhelmed	annoyed	anxious	dejected	eager	delighted
pressed	exasperated	concerned	disappointed	engaged	pleased
strained	frustrated	uneasy	discouraged	excited	proud
stretched	impatient	unsure	flat	interested	relieved
swamped	irritated	worried	let down	keen	satisfied

Word ladder sheet

Choose one family. Alone, write its six words from mildest (1) to strongest (6), as you use them. Then write your partner's order underneath and circle any word placed two or more places apart. There is no correct order.

Order	1 mildest	2	3	4	5	6 strongest
Family: _____						
My order						
My partner's order						

The word we placed furthest apart, and what each of us meant by it

_____

_____

Moment cards

All seven moments are fictional. Card D is for the facilitator's demonstration. In cards 1 to 3, "you" are a fictional character, and nobody needs to say whether it has happened to them. Cards 4 to 6 are about a colleague. The options are examples to weigh, not answers; you can write your own.

Card	The moment	Options to weigh
D. The lost room	In this card "you" are a fictional trainer. You arrive at 08:45 to run a 09:00 session. The room has been given to another team. Twelve participants are waiting in the corridor. You notice you are talking fast and your hands are cold.	A. Apologise to the group at length and look for a room together. B. Say "Give me five minutes. Coffee is in the kitchen on the left," then call the facilities desk. C. Start the session standing in the corridor.
1. The moved deadline	In this card "you" are a fictional team member. In a Monday meeting your manager says the client review moves from Friday to Wednesday. You have two other tasks due on Wednesday. You notice your jaw is tight and you have stopped taking notes. A colleague asks if you are all right.	A. Say nothing and work late to fit it all in. B. Say in the meeting: "Wednesday clashes with two things I have due. Can we agree which one moves?" C. Tell the colleague "I'm fine" and see the manager after the meeting with the two dates.
2. The reply-all	In this card "you" are a fictional coordinator. You sent a draft schedule to eight people. A senior colleague replies to all: "This clashes with the audit week. Did nobody check?" Your name is on the draft. You read the message three times and start typing a long reply.	A. Send the long reply now. B. Wait 20 minutes, then reply to the senior colleague only: "Thanks for spotting the clash. I'll send a revised draft by 16:00." C. Reply to all with a one-line fix, and call the colleague later about the tone.
3. The praise you did not expect	In this card "you" are a fictional analyst. In a project review the department head thanks you by name for the handover document. Your face gets warm, you say "It was nothing, really" and you change the subject. Later you wonder why you brushed it off.	A. Leave it. Brushing praise off does no harm. B. Send a short note: "Thank you for mentioning the handover document. It took a week, and it was good to hear it helped." C. Next time, say "Thank you" and stop there.
4. The quiet expert	A colleague who usually adds detail in planning calls has said nothing for 20 minutes. Their camera is off. When the chair asks if they agree, they type in the chat: "Fine with whatever is decided."	A. Carry on. They said they are fine. B. Send a private chat message: "You know this area best. Is there anything we are missing? Happy to hear it after the call too." C. Say in the call: "Before we decide, I would like to hear from Sam."
5. The short answers	A new colleague joined three weeks ago. When you ask about a task, they answer in one word. They arrive early and leave late. Twice you have seen them reading the same page of the process guide.	A. Send your questions by email so they have time to answer. B. Offer a fixed slot: "My first month here was a lot. Would 15 minutes a day to ask anything help?" C. Ask their manager whether something is wrong.
6. The loud desk	After a phone call a colleague puts the phone down hard, says "Unbelievable" to nobody and walks to the kitchen. Ten minutes later they come back and start working as if nothing happened. You need their sign-off on the rota by 15:00 today.	A. Ask for the sign-off now as if nothing happened. B. Wait until 14:30 and ask then. C. Say: "That sounded like a tough call. I need your sign-off on the rota by 15:00. Is now all right, or would 14:00 suit you better?"

Practice sheet

One sheet per round. Notes are enough. Write the two Notice lines alone before you compare with your partner.

Step	Your notes
Card, and whose moment it is: yours in the story, or a colleague's	
Notice: what I can see or hear, in facts anyone could check	
Notice: what I guess about it, marked as a guess	
Name: one to three words that might fit, and the signal behind each	
Choose: the options I weighed, and what each might lead to	
Choose: my choice and its first sentence. For a colleague, how I would check	
Compare: one thing my partner saw differently	

Observer sheet (for a trio)

Only for the third person in a trio. Make a mark each time you hear a behaviour, and write exact words where you can. This is a count of what you heard in one round. It is not a score of anyone, and a higher count is not always better.

Card: _____ Person 1: _____ Person 2: _____ Round: 1 / 2

What to listen for	Person 1	Person 2	Exact words
Stated a fact anyone could check			
Marked a guess as a guess			
Stated a guess as a fact			
Weighed more than one word			
Weighed more than one option			
Said a first sentence aloud			

One thing to tell the pair: a fact that was easy to miss, or a guess that slipped in as a fact

_____

My choose card and practice log

Private. Nobody collects or reads this page. For the card, use a work moment you expect in the next two weeks, or one of today's fictional cards. Then log one line each time you notice a moment at work. Write no names. Any line can stay blank, and a "No" in the last column is useful information, not a failure.

A moment where I would like to pause (no names needed)

_____

_____

The signal I will watch for: in my body, my words or my typing

_____

_____

One or two words from the cards I might use to name it to myself

_____

_____

The response I will choose, and its first sentence

_____

_____

Date	Moment (no names)	What I noticed first	Word I used	What I chose	Did I do it?

Filled example: practice sheet for card 6

A fictional round of card 6, “The loud desk”. These are Person 1’s notes.

Step	Person 1’s notes
Card, and whose moment it is: yours in the story, or a colleague’s	Card 6, “The loud desk”. A colleague’s moment.
Notice: what I can see or hear, in facts anyone could check	The phone went down hard after a call. They said “Unbelievable” to nobody and walked to the kitchen. They came back after ten minutes and started working. I need their sign-off on the rota by 15:00.
Notice: what I guess about it, marked as a guess	My guess is the call went badly. They may not want to talk about it. I do not know what the call was about, or whether it had anything to do with me.
Name: one to three words that might fit, and the signal behind each	Exasperated: the hard phone and “Unbelievable”. Strained: if the call added work. Not angry: they came back calm. All three stay guesses; I would not say any of them to my colleague.
Choose: the options I weighed, and what each might lead to	A. Ask now as if nothing happened: a rushed yes, or a sharp reply. B. Wait until 14:30: less time if they want changes. C. Short check with a choice of time: keeps the deadline visible and lets them pick.
Choose: my choice and its first sentence. For a colleague, how I would check	C. “That sounded like a tough call. I need your sign-off on the rota by 15:00. Is now all right, or would 14:00 suit you better?” If they say no to both, I ask my team lead who else can sign.
Compare: one thing my partner saw differently	My partner read the calm return as “relieved”. We agreed we cannot tell, and that the check question works either way.

Filled example: observer tally for card 6

The observer’s sheet for the same fictional round, from a trio. Times heard: Person 1 11, Person 2 9, 20 in the round. All 6 behaviours were heard at least once, and 5 of them from both people. Three guesses were stated as facts; both people noticed it in the review.

What to listen for	Person 1	Person 2	Exact words
Stated a fact anyone could check	4	3	P1: “The phone went down hard.” P2: “They came back after ten minutes.”
Marked a guess as a guess	3	2	P1: “My guess is the call went badly.” P2: “Maybe they were relieved to get it over.”
Stated a guess as a fact	1	2	P2: “He’s furious.” P1: “They’re embarrassed.”
Weighed more than one word	1	1	P1: “Exasperated more than angry.”
Weighed more than one option	1	1	P2: “If we wait until 14:30 there is no time for changes.”
Said a first sentence aloud	1	0	P1: “That sounded like a tough call. Is now all right, or would 14:00 suit you better?”

Facilitator run of show

1 Open, and say what this is not | 6 minutes

Two minutes: say the purpose. Say: “Today we practise three small moves with words and invented work moments: notice what is there, name it with a precise word, and choose a response. It is practice. It is not a test, it measures nothing, and nobody needs to talk about their own feelings.” Two minutes: show “When this practice is the wrong tool” and let people read it. One minute: if you use the term, say: “Emotional intelligence was described by the psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer in 1990 and made widely known by Daniel Goleman in 1995. We use none of their models today.” One minute: agree the rules. The moments are fictional, guesses stay guesses, anyone can pass or switch to writing.

2 Word ladders | 10 minutes

Two minutes: hand out the word cards and a word ladder sheet. Say: “Each family has six words in alphabetical order. Put them in order from mildest to strongest, as you use them. There is no correct order.” Give each pair one family. Three minutes: each person orders the family alone, in writing. Three minutes: pairs compare the positions and mark any word placed two or more places apart. Two minutes: ask two or three pairs: “Which word did you place far apart? What would you think if a colleague used it about a deadline?” Collect one or two words on a shared list.

3 Demonstrate notice, name, choose | 6 minutes

One minute: read card D, “The lost room”, aloud. Four minutes: think aloud. Notice: “Facts: 08:45, no room, twelve people waiting, I am talking fast and my hands are cold.” Name: “My first word is panic. From the cards, pressed and alarmed are closer.” Choose: read the three options and say what each might lead to, then choose B and say its first sentence. One minute: ask, “Where did I separate a fact from a guess?” Point to the three-step table.

4 Round 1: a “you” moment | 10 minutes

Pairs take card 1, 2 or 3. In these cards “you” are a fictional character; nobody says whether it has happened to them. Two minutes: both read the card. Three minutes: each person writes the two Notice lines alone, then they compare. Two minutes: Name, with up to three words from the cards and the signal behind each. Three minutes: Choose. Weigh the options, choose one or write your own, and say the first sentence aloud to your partner. In a trio, the third person uses the observer sheet. Call each change of step aloud.

5 Round 2: a colleague’s moment | 10 minutes

Pairs take card 4, 5 or 6 and a fresh practice sheet, with the same timing. Say: “This time the feelings belong to someone else. Every word you name is a guess, and your choice should check or offer, not tell them what they feel.” In a trio, a different person observes. Walk between pairs and listen for guesses said as facts; note the words, not the names.

6 Group debrief | 10 minutes

Six minutes: ask for words, not people. “Which fact was easy to miss?” “Where did a guess slip in as a fact?” “Which first sentence would you actually say?” Collect phrases in the chat or on a flipchart. Four minutes: ask, “When would a colleague’s moment need more than a check question?” Connect the answers to the table from the opening: distress, a performance concern or a real conflict goes elsewhere.

7 Private choose card and close | 8 minutes

Five minutes of private writing on the choose card. Say: “Think of a work moment in the next two weeks where you would like to pause, or use one of today’s cards. Nobody will see this card.” Three minutes: each person shares one word or one first sentence they will keep, aloud or in the chat, or passes.

Reference tables

Choose moment cards for your group

Give each pair one “you” card (1 to 3) and one colleague card (4 to 6). Keep card D for your demonstration.

If your group…	Use cards	Why
Works to tight deadlines	1 and 6	Both moments have a time limit, so a choice has to fit the work as well as the person.
Works mostly in writing or online	2 and 4	Signals are thin in chat and email, so the gap between fact and guess is wide.
Has new starters or is growing	5 and 3	A quiet newcomer and praise that is brushed off are both easy to misread.
Runs training or events	1 and 4	Card 1 is a change of plan and card 4 is a quiet voice in a call. Use card D for your demonstration.
Prefers a gentle start	3 and 4	No one is under pressure in these two moments, and the options are low stakes.

What the observer counts

For the third person in a trio. One mark each time a behaviour is heard. The count guides one note to the pair. It is not a score of anyone.

Behaviour	What counts	Example words
Stated a fact anyone could check	A word, action, time or count from the card, said as it is.	“They said ‘Fine with whatever is decided’ in the chat.”
Marked a guess as a guess	A guess with “maybe”, “I wonder” or “my guess is”.	“Maybe they disagree and do not want to say it in front of everyone.”
Stated a guess as a fact	A guess said as if it were known. Count it without comment; it is useful to hear.	“They’re sulking.”
Weighed more than one word	Two or more words compared, or a word made milder or stronger.	“Not angry. More like impatient.”
Weighed more than one option	Two or more responses compared, with what each might lead to.	“If we carry on, we might miss the risk they know about.”
Said a first sentence aloud	The actual words of the chosen response, not a description of it.	“You know this area best. Is there anything we are missing?”

Filled example: two ladders compared

Family: Frustration. 1 is the mildest word and 6 the strongest. The two people placed 1 word in the same place, and 1 word two or more places apart (largest gap 2). That word is the one to talk about: there is no correct order.

Word	Person 1	Person 2	Gap	Note
irritated	2	1	1	
impatient	1	3	2	Talk about it
annoyed	3	2	1	
frustrated	4	5	1	
exasperated	5	4	1	
angry	6	6	0	

Debrief and next steps

Questions for reflection

- Which fact in your card was easy to miss, and what did you notice instead?
- Where did a guess slip in as a fact, and how did saying “maybe” change what you chose?
- Which word did you and your partner understand differently, and what would that mean in a real message?
- Which first sentence would you actually say at work, and what would you change to make it your own?

Adapt the session

- For four or five people, work as two pairs, or a pair and a trio, and run the group debrief as one conversation. With three people, one trio with an observer each round works well.
- For a 40-minute version, keep the opening (6 minutes), shorten the word ladders to 6 minutes (one family, no group round), skip the demonstration, run one round with a colleague’s moment (10), debrief for 10 and close with the choose card (8).
- Online, use breakout rooms of two, paste the word list, the card and the round timing in each room, and let pairs type their notes in a shared document. Cameras are optional. Read the card aloud for anyone using a screen reader or audio only.
- For quieter participants or anyone who prefers not to speak, every step has a written route: the ladder, the practice sheet and the choose card are all written, and the first sentence can be typed instead of said. Passing needs no reason. Nobody is asked about their own feelings at any point.
- To write your own moment cards, keep them fictional, ordinary and work-related: a deadline, a message, a meeting, a handover. Give facts and visible signals, not feelings. Do not use a real event from the team, and avoid anything from “When this practice is the wrong tool”.

After the session

Send the three steps, the word cards and the practice log to the group within one working day. Suggest that each person keeps the log privately for two weeks: one line when they notice a moment, the word they used and what they chose. At the next session, spend five minutes on one word or sentence people found useful, without stories about colleagues. If someone tells you about a situation from “When this practice is the wrong tool”, do not coach it; point them to the support their organisation has.

Questions people ask

What are good emotional intelligence activities for adults at work?

Short, written practice with fictional work moments works well: separate what you saw from what you guess, find a more precise word, and choose a response with its first sentence. This kit uses 36 emotion-word cards in six families and six moments, such as a moved deadline, a reply-all and a colleague who goes quiet in a call. It needs no props, products or personal stories.

Does this kit measure or improve emotional intelligence?

No. It is skills practice, and it measures nothing. There is no questionnaire, no score and no “EQ” result, and the observer tally counts words heard in one round, not a quality of a person. We make no claim about results. The term emotional intelligence was described by Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990) and made widely known by Daniel Goleman (1995); the kit does not use or test their models.

Do participants have to talk about their own feelings?

No. Every moment is fictional, and in the “you” cards the “you” is a character. The choose card at the end is private and can use a fictional moment. Anyone can pass, write instead of speak, or take the observer role. If a participant is distressed, pause the activity and point to the support your organisation has.

How is this different from the active listening exercises?

The active listening exercises practise hearing, checking and summarising what someone says. This kit works one step earlier and inside your own head: telling a fact from a guess, finding a precise word, and choosing a response before you speak or type. The two fit well together: run active listening first, then this session. The communication role-play cards cover the conversation itself, such as explaining a change or saying no.

How many people do I need, and can I run it online?

Four to twenty people in pairs. With an odd number, make one trio; the third person uses the observer sheet and a different person observes in each round. Online, use breakout rooms of two, paste the card and the word list in each room, and keep cameras optional.

What is included in the free and editable files?

The open PDF has the table of situations this practice is not for, the three steps, the word cards, the word ladder sheet, the seven moment cards, the practice sheet, the observer sheet, the private choose card with a two-week practice log, three filled examples and the 60-minute facilitator plan. Subscribers also receive the editable Word file, an Excel workbook with the session plan, the cards, a word ladder that counts the gaps between two people, an observer tally, a pair planner and a practice log, and a CSV of the session plan.

Use and sharing

Free to use and adapt in your own training sessions, including paid client work. Do not resell or redistribute the unmodified download as a standalone product. Share the resource page instead.