

**The role of emotional competence on the effectiveness of natural
resource management committees**

by

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ABSTRACT

Natural resource management in Australia over the past 40 years, in part, has been influenced by the need for global public sector reform. These reforms have provided the foundation for the development of the current Australian natural resource management model which is based on the establishment and operation of locally driven natural resource management committees. These committees operate in an environment where decisions are often complex and contentious, and where leadership and community engagement are vital for achieving long-term natural resource management outcomes. As these newly formed committees began operation it was observed by the community and stakeholder groups that some committees were more effective than others. This observation prompted a review of the natural resource management model by the Australian Government focused primarily on the economic and environmental aspects of the model. The evidence in the literature supports the importance of emotional competencies in the effectiveness of both individuals and committees, although this was overlooked in the development of the review process for the Australian natural resource management model. This study investigated what influence both individual and group emotional competence has on the effective operation of natural resource management committees.

This research project was a case study of seven natural resource management committees. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected by surveying committee members of each of the seven natural resource management committees and two observers of each committee. Three sets of survey data were collected to facilitate data triangulation and to provide detailed emotional competence profiles for the seven natural resource management committees. The first and second sets of data collected targeted individual committee members on each of the seven committees, and the third set of data collected targeted two observers from each committee. Additional data, which has provided supplement to the survey data, was collected from individual committee member follow-up interviews, state and federal reviews of each committee and committee annual reports. The emotional competence profiles for each of the seven natural resource management committees were then analysed against a set of outcomes to determine whether there was a relationship between the effective operation of each committee.

The findings of this study showed that there was a very strong relationship between group emotional competence and the operating effectiveness of natural resource management committees. Committees with an overall higher rating of group emotional competence ranked higher in achieving their ten natural resource management criteria. Examples of the criteria used are developed systems and processes for the facilitation of open learning, long term project outcomes documented and implementing stakeholder engagement processes. All seven committees reported the use of emotionally competent group behaviours from a moderate to large extent, and while the emotional competence profiles were all statistically significantly different, the profile trends were consistent. The behavioural norms of creating emotional resources, confronting members and team self-evaluation were ranked the lowest, along with the dimensions of group management of members, group self-awareness and group self management. All committees perceived that the use of emotionally competent group behaviours were higher at both the individual and cross-boundary levels when compared to the group level. There was no statistical relationship between committee emotional competence and the emotional competence of individual committee members, even though there were significant differences among the emotional competence profiles for individual members. The statistical results indicated that the emotional competence of the Chair did not impact on the level of emotional competence within the respective committee, although, the qualitative results did suggest that there were linkages between the behaviours adopted by the Chair and the ability of the committee to develop emotionally competent behavioural norms. Finally, specific team characteristics and behaviours associated with committee emotional competence profiles were identified, and when related to the natural resource management governance principles that contribute to the effective operation of these committees, the results suggested that a number of committees had well developed accountability, adaptability, capability and networking skills. The results also suggested that all but one of the committees had poorly developed legitimacy, transparency and inclusiveness and integration skills.

There were a number of identified delimitations of this study in which the first was the small sample size. Due to the tyranny of distance and the perception by committee members that the results of this study would be used negatively by government, only seven of the current 59 natural resource management committees operating across Australia volunteered to participate. The study relied predominately on the collection of quantitative data from questionnaires which measured an individual's perceived emotional competence and not their

actual emotional competence. The measurement of committee performance was based solely on independent, state and federal government reviews, reports and audits and can be considered the third delimitation of this study. These documents could potentially result in bias due to their development by government and therefore it would be useful for future research to complement these outcomes with performance data and perceptions from the wider community. The fourth delimitation of the study was that contextual factors, such as the developmental phase of the committee and the organisational climate in which the committee is operating was not considered. A future area for research should examine the effects of committee developmental phases and the public sector organisational culture on the development of individual committee member and committee emotional competence. The study relied mainly on the collection of quantitative data from individual committee members and observers and can be considered the fifth delimitation of the study. It would have been beneficial to engage the committees in focus group discussions to explore the use of emotional competent behaviours. The final identified delimitation of this study is that data collected represents a single snapshot in time. Emotional competence can be learned and changes in the development of committees and their potential for delivering effective outcomes can occur across multiple time scales. As a result, it would be desirable to collect individual and group emotional competence, and committee effectiveness data over a period of time to enable a dynamic interpretation of the emotional competence and the possible attribution of causal relationships.

In addition to those areas already mentioned, future research must 'bridge the gap' and move towards identifying the structural and cultural components within the public sector framework that prevent or suppress the development of emotional competence in natural resource management committees. This area of research should also endeavour to examine the effects of the public sector organisational culture on the Chair's emotional competent behaviours and the development of individual emotional competence. Finally, future researchers may wish to investigate the different ways that educational and training programs can improve the emotional competencies for both individuals and committees.

From both an Australian and international perspective, the results from this study have practical implications for natural resource management. The key implication is recognising that emotional competence impacts on the performance of committees and therefore the challenge for the public sector is in developing mechanisms, structures and cultures that will

facilitate and support the development of emotionally competent committees and Chairs. In working towards achieving this, the public sector needs to initiate innovative educational and training programs which will not only assist in developing emotional competence, but provide understanding of an individual's or committee's emotional competence and identify potential for improvement, along with stimulating self-reflection and providing important stakeholder feedback. In addition, the current selection process for appointing members to natural resource management committees should be reviewed and consideration given to including emotional competence elements in varying degrees according to the specific requirements for natural resource management.

To date, the importance of the human component of the Australian Natural Resource Management Model has been assumed by the Australian and State and Territory public sectors. This research provides the first ever review of this human component and suggests that the human component plays a vital role in determining the effectiveness of natural resource management committees.

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ABSTRACT.....	II
CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP OF THESIS.....	VI
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	VII
LIST OF TABLES.....	XII
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XVII
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	XVIII
CHAPTER 1.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 OVERVIEW.....	1
1.2 AUSTRALIAN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT MODEL.....	2
1.3 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT.....	7
1.4 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY.....	11
1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	13
1.5.1 Research Objectives and Questions.....	13
1.5.2 Participants.....	14
1.5.3 Emotional Intelligence Measures.....	14
1.5.3.1 Individual Work Profile Questionnaire.....	14
1.5.3.2 Committee Experience Questionnaire.....	15
1.5.4 Procedure.....	15
1.6 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	16
1.7 CONCLUSION.....	17
CHAPTER 2.....	18
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	18
2.1 PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM.....	18
2.2 NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA.....	22
2.2.1 Review of the Natural Resource Management Model in Australia.....	29
2.3 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE.....	31
2.3.1 Historical Review of Emotional Intelligence.....	32
2.3.2 Defining Emotional Intelligence.....	35
2.3.3 Measuring Individual Emotional Intelligence.....	39
2.3.3.1 Competence Based Individual Emotional Intelligence Measures.....	40
2.3.3.2 Ability Based Individual Emotional Intelligence Measures.....	46
2.3.4 Measuring Group Emotional Intelligence.....	48
2.3.5 Selecting Emotional Intelligence Measures for Natural Resource Management Committees.....	55
2.3.6 Issues With Measuring Emotional Intelligence.....	64
2.3.7 Emotional Intelligence and Performance.....	66
2.3.8 Improving Emotional Intelligence.....	71
2.3.9 Emotional Intelligence Programs for the Workplace.....	72
2.3.10 Emotional Intelligence and Natural Resource Management.....	73

CHAPTER 3.....76

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 76

3.1 OVERVIEW 76

3.2 NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE STUDY 77

3.2.1 Research Objectives and Questions 77

3.2.2 Participants 82

3.2.3 Emotional Intelligence Measures 82

3.2.4 Committee Performance 85

3.2.5 Procedure 85

3.2.6 Permission to Conduct the Study 89

3.2.7 Data Analysis 89

3.3 PILOT STUDY 90

3.4 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY 91

CHAPTER 4.....93

RESULTS 93

4.1 OVERVIEW 93

4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FOR INDIVIDUAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND OBSERVERS 95

4.2.1 Profiles for Individual Members from the Seven Committees 95

4.2.2 Demographic Information for Observers 98

4.3 THE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF COMMITTEES 100

4.3.1 The Emotional Competence of Committees as Assessed by Both Members and Observers . 111

4.4 INDIVIDUAL OBSERVER STORIES 132

4.4.1 Committee One 132

4.4.2 Committee Two 132

4.4.3 Committee Three 133

4.4.4 Committee Four 133

4.4.5 Committee Five 133

4.4.6 Committee Six 134

4.4.7 Committee Seven 134

4.5 THE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF INDIVIDUAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS 135

4.6 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL COMMITTEE MEMBER EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AND COMMITTEE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE 172

4.7 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMITTEE CHAIR EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AND COMMITTEE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE 172

4.8 TEAM CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIOURS ASSOCIATED WITH COMMITTEE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE 173

4.9 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMITTEE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AND THE OPERATING EFFECTIVENESS OF NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES 175

4.10 INDIVIDUAL COMMITTEE MEMBER STORIES 179

4.10.1 Committee Two 179

4.10.2 Committee Three 180

4.10.3 Committee Four 180

4.10.4 Committee Five 181

4.10.5 Committee Six 182

4.10.6 Committee Seven 182

4.11 SUMMARY 183

CHAPTER 5.....185

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION..... 185

5.1	INTRODUCTION	185
5.2	THE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF COMMITTEES	185
5.3	THE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF INDIVIDUAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS	188
5.4	TEAM BEHAVIOURS AND GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES	191
5.5	THE OPERATING EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMITTEES.....	193
5.6	DELIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH	196
	IMPLICATIONS.....	199
	<u>REFERENCES.....</u>	<u>202</u>
	<u>APPENDICES.....</u>	<u>226</u>
	APPENDIX 1: INDIVIDUAL WORK PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE.....	226
	APPENDIX 2: COMMITTEE EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE.....	233
	APPENDIX 3: OBSERVER QUESTIONNAIRE	237
	APPENDIX 4: COMMITTEE MEMBER FOLLOW UP QUESTIONNAIRE	248
	APPENDIX 5: INDIVIDUAL OBSERVER STORIES	252
	APPENDIX 6: INDIVIDUAL COMMITTEE MEMBER STORIES	265

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Australian Natural Resource Management Regional Bodies
Table 2	The Composite Scales and Subscales for the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory
Table 3	Clusters and Competencies for the Emotional Competency Inventory 360
Table 4	Components and Scales of the Emotional Intelligence View 360
Table 5	Themes and Subthemes of the Workgroup Emotional Intelligence Profile
Table 6	Group Emotional Intelligence Norms
Table 7	Summary of Individual and Group Emotional Intelligence Measures
Table 8	Skills Associated with Natural Resource Management Governance Principles
Table 9	Emotional Intelligence Framework and Group Behaviours
Table 10	Summary of Research Questions, Data Collected and Method of Analysis
Table 11	Reliability of Group Emotional Intelligence Norms
Table 12	Demographic Information for Individual Committee Members
Table 13	Profiles for Observers of the Seven Committees
Table 14	ANOVA Between Committee Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 15	Multiple Comparisons Among the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 16	ANOVA Between Committee Emotional Competence Scores for the Six Committee Emotional Competence Dimensions
Table 17	Multiple Comparisons Among the Six Committee Emotional Competence Dimensions
Table 18	ANOVA Between Committee Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Committee Emotional Competence Levels

Table 19	Pearson Correlations Between Committee One Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 20	ANOVA Between Committee One Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 21	Pearson Correlations Between Committee Two Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 22	ANOVA Between Committee Two Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 23	Pearson Correlations Between Committee Three Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 24	ANOVA Between Committee Three Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 25	ANOVA Between Committee Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Six Dimensions
Table 26	ANOVA Between Committee Three Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Levels
Table 27	Pearson Correlations Between Committee Four Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 28	ANOVA Between Committee Four Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 29	ANOVA Between Committee Four Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Six Dimensions
Table 30	Pearson Correlations Between Committee Five Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 31	ANOVA Between Committee Five Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 32	ANOVA Between Committee Five Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Six Dimensions
Table 33	ANOVA Between Committee Five Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Levels

Table 34	Pearson Correlations Between Committee Six Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 35	ANOVA Between Committee Six Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 36	Pearson Correlations Between Committee Seven Member Emotional Competence Self-Assessment and Observer Assessment
Table 37	ANOVA Between Committee Seven Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Nine Behavioural Norms
Table 38	ANOVA Between Committee Seven Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Six Dimensions
Table 39	ANOVA Between Committee Seven Member Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Levels
Table 40	ANOVA Between Committee One Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 41	Multiple Comparisons Among the Six Committee One Members for the Components
Table 42	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee One
Table 43	ANOVA Between Committee One Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 44	Multiple Comparisons Among the Six Committee One Members for the Scales
Table 45	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee One
Table 46	ANOVA Between Committee Two Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 47	Multiple Comparisons Among the Eight Committee Two Members for the Components
Table 48	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee Two
Table 49	ANOVA Between Committee Two Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 50	Multiple Comparisons Among the Eight Committee Two Members for the Scales

Table 51	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee Two
Table 52	ANOVA Between Committee Three Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 53	Multiple Comparisons Among the Eight Committee Three Members for the Components
Table 54	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee Three
Table 55	ANOVA Between Committee Three Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 56	Multiple Comparisons Among the Eight Committee Three Members for the Scales
Table 57	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee Three
Table 58	ANOVA Between Committee Four Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 59	Multiple Comparisons Among the Seven Committee Four Members for the Components
Table 60	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee Four
Table 61	ANOVA Between Committee Four Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 62	Multiple Comparisons Among the Seven Committee Four Members for the Scales
Table 63	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee Four
Table 64	ANOVA Between Committee Five Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 65	Multiple Comparisons Among the Six Committee Five Members for the Components
Table 66	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee Five
Table 67	ANOVA Between Committee Five Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 68	Multiple Comparisons Among the Six Committee Five Members for the Scales
Table 69	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee Five

Table 70	ANOVA Between Committee Six Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 71	Multiple Comparisons Among the Four Committee Six Members for the Components
Table 72	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee Six
Table 73	ANOVA Between Committee Six Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 74	Multiple Comparisons Among the Four Committee Six Members for the Scales
Table 75	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee Six
Table 76	ANOVA Between Committee Seven Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the Three Components
Table 77	Multiple Comparisons Among the Five Committee Seven Members for the Components
Table 78	Means of the Average Component Scores for Committee Seven
Table 79	ANOVA Between Committee Seven Individual Emotional Competence Scores for the 17 Scales
Table 80	Multiple Comparisons Among the Five Committee Seven Members for the Scales
Table 81	Means of the Average Scale Scores for Committee Seven
Table 82	Team Characteristics and Behaviours Associated With the Seven Committees
Table 83	Committee Effectiveness in Achieving Selected Natural Resource Management Criteria
Table 84	ANOVA Between Committee Effectiveness and Committee Emotional Competence
Table 85	Linear Regression Model Summary

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1 Model of Natural Resource Management in Australia
- Figure 2 Study's Procedural Steps
- Figure 3 Committee Emotional Competence Profiles
- Figure 4 Overall Committee Emotional Competence Profiles
- Figure 5 Estimated Marginal Means Profile Plot of the Nine Behavioural Norms
- Figure 6 Estimated Marginal Means Profile Plot of the Six Committee Emotional Competence Dimensions
- Figure 7 Estimated Marginal Means Profile Plot of the Three Committee Emotional Competence Levels
- Figure 8 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee One as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 9 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee Two as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 10 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee Three as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 11 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee Four as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 12 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee Five as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 13 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee Six as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 14 The Emotional Competence Profile for Committee Seven as Assessed by Members and Observers
- Figure 15 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee One
- Figure 16 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee Two
- Figure 17 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee Three

- Figure 18 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee Four
- Figure 19 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee Five
- Figure 20 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee Six
- Figure 21 Individual Committee Member Emotional Competence Profiles for Committee Seven
- Figure 22 Group Emotional Competence Level Profiles for the Seven Committees

LIST OF APPENDICES

- Appendix 1 Individual Work Profile Questionnaire
- Appendix 2 Committee Experience Questionnaire
- Appendix 3 Observer Questionnaire
- Appendix 4 Committee Member Follow Up Questionnaire
- Appendix 5 Individual Observer Stories
- Appendix 6 Individual Committee Member Stories