Emotional Intelligence and the IRB

AnneMarie Mal MDiv, CIM
Shemetra Owens, CIP, CIM
Baystate Health System

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI), or the capacity to be aware of and control one's emotions, can give a person ways to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. Most educated people are used to environments that call for demonstrating your level of mastery of information as a means of distinguishing intelligence. However, EI is not about mastery of information for dominance over others. Instead, EI is about being aware of the emotional dynamics in a situation and it is measured by how well one is able respond to those dynamics in a way that is helpful rather than harmful.

Using Emotional Intelligence Techniques with Investigators

Primary Investigators (PIs), especially in health systems, are usually over-scheduled and wearing 1000 hats. They can see the step of submitting an IRB application as a roadblock to their research and approach the IRB with this attitude. A first inclination can be to defend the importance of the IRB and the office. The effect of this is a back-and-forth battle over IRB submissions that wastes time and energy.

The EI approach instead lends toward a helping attitude. To lay this foundation we recommend having conversations with PIs using Zoom or over the phone, human to human. This builds rapport and relationships between your office and the research community. Here are some other key EI techniques commonly used at Baystate:

1) Start with **actively** listen to PI concerns. Most people listen to others while formulating their response at the same time. This will not work to help diffuse an aggravated PI. What they want is to be understood.

-At Baystate, we use the talk back method to help them feel their frustrations have been heard. This method also helps the IRB to understand what they are really upset about.

-Once they are done expressing their frustration and feel understood, a space for constructive conversation can open. A good way to transition to this is to say, "The IRB is here to help you achieve your research goals. How can we help you?"

2) Next, take an active role in reaching out to PIs who may need help. When a submission has been sitting, take the initiative to ask if they need support. It may be that they are stuck and don't know where to start or who to contact.

3) Finally, attempt to help the PIs find a road forward through the IRB process instead of being a roadblock to their research. An example of this might be helping them during their study design to create a project that works within the regulations.

Keep In Mind:

1. A key component of Emotional Intelligence is not to take what upset PIs say personally. When people are overwhelmed in life, they are often looking to take it out somewhere. Reacting to people defensively when they are in this state produces more confusion and chaos for everyone.
2. An office needs to be doing these things consistently over time for the attitude toward the IRB to shift within an organization. Keeping the lines of communication open between the office and PIs/coordinators takes a lot of time and energy. With time and consistency, PIs will start to spread the word through the organization that the IRB is helpful, effective, and efficient.
3. At the outset, it might seem that your office doesn't have time for this kind of one-on-one engagement with people. It may even slow down your turn around times at first. However, the side effect of this kind of relationship building in the long run is improved turn around numbers. The reason for this is that PIs will have cleaner submissions and be comfortable leaning on the IRB for questions prior to submission.

Using Emotional Intelligence Techniques for Internal Team Dynamics

The IRB office can withstand external if the internal team is strong, cohesive, and feels well supported by each other/management. However, if IRB staff must come to work and deal with frustrated PIs, an institution that doesn't value the IRB, and internal power struggles/strife, turnover rates will be high. This is because the average person cannot endure that much emotional challenge, especially coupled with how intrinsically challenging IRB work already is.

Emotional Intelligence techniques can be used internally to make team members feel respected, supported, and valued, contributing to lower turnover rates and a more cohesive team. These are some ways to foster a sense of teamwork and collaboration instead of competition among staff:

1) Applaud your team members. All the time, publicly and to their face. Mention other people's work, and their triumphs every chance you get. People want to come to work when they feel valued.
2) Present a united front to the research community. When issues arise give each other the benefit of the doubt and investigate the issue. This is top down, but also across the team.
3) Make it a priority to give the team time to bond, otherwise known as "watercooler talk". These conversations that are not strictly work-related are where innovative strategies can be born and ideas for efficiency can be developed
4) Hire capable people and trust them to do the job they were hired for. Micromanagement squashes creativity and innovation. Manage and follow-up, but give a deadline and leave it at that. Delegate responsibility and trust people to take the actions.
5) Find ways to evaluate people and their team contributions outside of metrics. People are not numbers, and when they are viewed only as a means of production it is demoralizing.
6) Learn the career goals of each member of the team and make it a point to help them get there. Hindering people's growth out of fear that they will leave, only ensures that they will leave.
7) When training staff, repetition is key. The IRB learning curve is steep. The sheer amount of information a person is exposed to when onboarding to a new IRB is overwhelming. Don't expect that if you say something once that it will just stick. Patience, patience, patience.
8) To avoid staff burnout, give team members plenty of time to deal with their lives and go on vacations (without any guilt). Overstaff your office by one person. That person will be the backup when people are out.

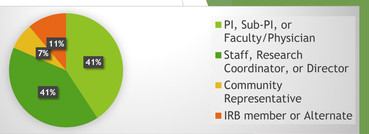
Revising IRB Applications for User Ease and Readability

Among IRB professionals it is commonly accepted that consent forms need to be at approximately the 8th grade reading level. Translating this idea to the IRB, most PIs are unfamiliar with the IRB submission process and IRB applications should be optimized for readability and user ease. We have optimized submission documents by:

- Reducing jargon
- Breaking up large blocks of text into sections
- Color-coding to delineate between optional sections and necessary sections
- Bringing down the instruction language to the 8th grade reading level
- Consolidating superfluous documents
- Eliminating outdated and repetitive language

Survey Deployed to the Baystate Research Community

In 2024 Baystate IRB deployed a survey to the research community to gain access to current attitudes toward the IRB. This qualitative survey included a qualitative section and a Likert scale. The survey yielded 27 responses.



Survey Question: Please identify one IRB form or resource that you have found helpful and why?

Faculty/PIs: Three faculty/PIs responded that they appreciated our streamlined and updated forms.

- "…the HSRD form, it really is a very concise and direct form, if you follow the directions on it…"
- "HSRD form has been updated nicely and makes much more sense than the last version"
- "I recently used the exempt review form and I found it to be very well written."

Staff/RC/Dir: Four staff/RCs/Dir mentioned our improved, streamlined consent form template. Others discussed the job aids for working in the IRB management system. Another RC appreciated the checklists we provide to help make sure they have a complete submission.

- "The new consent template is a huge improvement."
- "The checklists are very helpful and make the IRB review process feel much more approachable."

Community Representatives: Both representatives cited the helpfulness of our consent template.

IRB members/alternates: All mentioned our forms, the access to them, and how we continue to update, based upon community input.

Likert scale statements:

- **I feel the IRB is accessible**
- **I feel that the updated submission documents are easier to use**
- **I can easily find the items I need for submission**
- **I feel supported by the IRB in my research**
- **It is easy to get my IRB questions answered**
- **I feel that it is easier to submit to the IRB than it used to be**

Faculty/PIs

- Out of the eleven in this category only 5 answered. **Four** answered **Agree** or **Strongly Agree** to all of the statements;
- **One** answered that they **Strongly Disagree**.
- The "Strongly Disagree" person didn't answer any other questions in the survey, except the Likert scale statements at the end.

Staff/RC/Dir:

- Only three members in this category responded, and all three chose **Agree** or **Strongly Agree.**

Community Representatives:

- Our two community members provided comments indicating they were honored to sit on the IRB, and/or strongly agreed that the IRB was helpful and easy to navigate.
- "It is an honor to sit on the IRB and to participate in the process of reviewing studies with the remarkable and dedicated professionals of (Our institution)."

IRB members/alternates:

- The three IRB members/alternates that responded either responded positively, with a **Neutral** or **Strongly Agree** to the statements.

Conclusion:

Press Ganey deploys a yearly employee feedback and satisfaction survey at Baystate Medical Center. All current team members of the IRB staff have been employed two years or less. In 2024, of the 8 employees of the Human Research Protections Program, 6 participated in the Employee health survey. Findings from this survey support that team members generally feel respected, supported, and that teamwork is encouraged. Findings also support that staff turnover within the office culture created using Emotional Intelligence Techniques is unlikely.

During the 2021 Baystate IRB office had a change of leadership. Since this change of leadership and implementation of the Emotional Intelligence campaign, two employees have turned over in an office of eight. However, this short period of time does not give us a robust data set from which to measure employee satisfaction with longevity since most of the team members were hired within the past two years.

While Mean full board turn around numbers have reduced from 53 days in 2022 to 46 days in 2023, there was also a change to how metrics have been measured since the change of leadership, which makes it challenging to compare to prior years. The metrics are not yet complete for 2024.

However, since looking at the outcomes of this EI campaign Baystate IRB has initiated a concentrated branding effort to represent our office and our message to the larger institution in a more focused way. We have created a vision statement, and a logo is in the works with standardized colors. This will allow recognition and consistency in communications disbursed throughout the institution.



annemarie.mal@baystatehealth.org
linkedin.com/in/annemariemal



shemetra.owens@baystatehealth.org
https://www.linkedin.com/in/shemetra-owens-cip-cim-294879150/