

IMHO: Emotional Intelligence at Work

This is the third in a series looking at trends in our world of learning and development. Not so much a how-to series, more of a why-to. In this article, Rob Sheffield looks at emotions in the workplace.

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In the popular mythology of decades past, employees were encouraged to turn up for work on time and leave their brains at the door. Emotions didn't get that far— they were the embarrassing cousin not invited to the party.

How things have changed. I teach on a number of post-graduate programmes and in response to the question: "How important are emotions in the workplace?", managers say things like:

"Very. We can't ignore them."

"People expect different things now. They want to be heard, listened to."

Changes in society

Acknowledgement, understanding and use of emotions is here to stay, and will become a more important facet of a leader's education. Greater numbers of people in higher education means they will have higher expectations. Meanwhile quicker access to more information, allied with greater organisational needs for improved performance mean that the focus on the individual will be with us for some time.

The hard facts

Daniel Goleman first wrote about the key role of emotions in his book "Emotional Intelligence" (1) (EI), in 1996. In this and his subsequent books, (2) Goleman argued that an understanding of one's own and others' emotions, as well as means of using this knowledge wisely accounts for much of excellent performance in the workplace. Sure, IQ matters, but not as much as we think. IQ and a decent professional knowledge may get us into the role we want, but what accounts for superior performance in that role? According to Goleman, EI is twice as important as a differentiator across all roles, and is more important as we get more senior. At senior leadership levels, EI accounts for nearly 90% of the distinction between average and superior performance. We have to get more done, more effectively, through more people.

The Gallup organisation has just released "12: The Elements of Great Managing" (3). This is an update to its earlier title: "First, Break All The Rules". The new book distils research from interviews with 10 million employees, across 41 different countries. It's nothing if not comprehensive! The key message: employee engagement pays off:

- "Engaged employees average 27% less absenteeism than those who are actively engaged.
- Business units with a surplus of disengaged employees suffered 31% more turnover than those with a critical mass of engaged employees.

Findings from neuroscience

In a more recent title, (4) Goleman calls on evidence from the emerging world of neuroscience to explain the role played by emotions in learning, and by implication, performance. Describing how stress levels affect our performance, Goleman states: "The more intense the pressure the more our performance and thinking will suffer... We plunge into what neuroscientists call 'cognitive dysfunction.'... the hippocampus, near the amygdala in the mid-brain, is our central organ for learning... It enables us to convert the contents of 'working memory' – new information held briefly in the pre-frontal cortex – into long-term memory for storage. This neural act is the heart of learning... The hippocampus is especially vulnerable to ongoing emotional distress, because of the damaging effects of cortisol, which attacks the neurons of the hippocampus... with a disastrous effect on learning."

As we've always known, too much stress forces attention on the emotions we're feeling, at the expense of clarity of thought and learning. What's different about this research is the dawn of understanding about how this plays out in the brain.

Goleman later states succinctly that "leadership boils down to a series of social exchanges in which the leader can drive the other person's emotions into a better or worse state."

Practicality

Creativity and innovation are often cited as being essential for our economy to climb up the value chain and sustain its global competitiveness. Where will the ideas come from? Where do they come from now? Are there effective ways of stimulating ideas? Is there research that corroborates our experience about this?

Let's look separately at idea generation and idea implementation. There is plenty of research evidence about emotional states conducive to effective idea generation. First, guess what doesn't work? That's right: time and people pressure! Too much of this tends to narrow our thinking and tip us into habitual responses. What we need is enough time and space, with a clear enough sense of purpose for what we're doing. (5)

The other thing that helps here is having fun! Humour and fun seem to help us make more connections between the ideas we have in our head. Partly, it reduces our inhibitions allowing us to make spontaneous connections. It also makes us more likely to say what we're thinking. There are clear imperatives here for managers trying to maximise the chances of eliciting quantity and quality of ideas.

Idea implementation is different. What's needed most is persistence, as ideas hit barriers, and have to be morphed and made acceptable without losing their shine. Managers have to be adaptable and encouraging whilst noticing where the energy remains for the fight.

Emotions and the future

The need to raise performance levels through superior knowledge and learning will drive a continued interest in emotions. By 2012 I predict:

- Business schools will partner with centres for neurosciences. Expect more neuroscientists lecturing on post-graduate programmes and the CIPD curriculum.

- We'll see more EI-ability measures for assessment and development purposes.

- There will be increased education of the workforce on how emotions affect performance.
- We will become expert in testing and refining our own cortisol and adrenaline levels in the workplace.

Rob Sheffield, February 2007

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Sources:

- (1) Emotional Intelligence (1996), Daniel Goleman, Bloomsbury, London
- (2) Working with Emotional intelligence (1999), Daniel Goleman, Bloomsbury, London
- (3) 12: The Elements Of Great Managing, (2006), Rodd Wagner and James Harter, Gallup Press, New York
- (4) Social Intelligence, The New Science of Human Relationships (2006), Daniel Goleman, Hutchinson, London
- (5) Creativity Under The Gun, (Aug 2002), Theresa Amabile et al, Harvard Business Review