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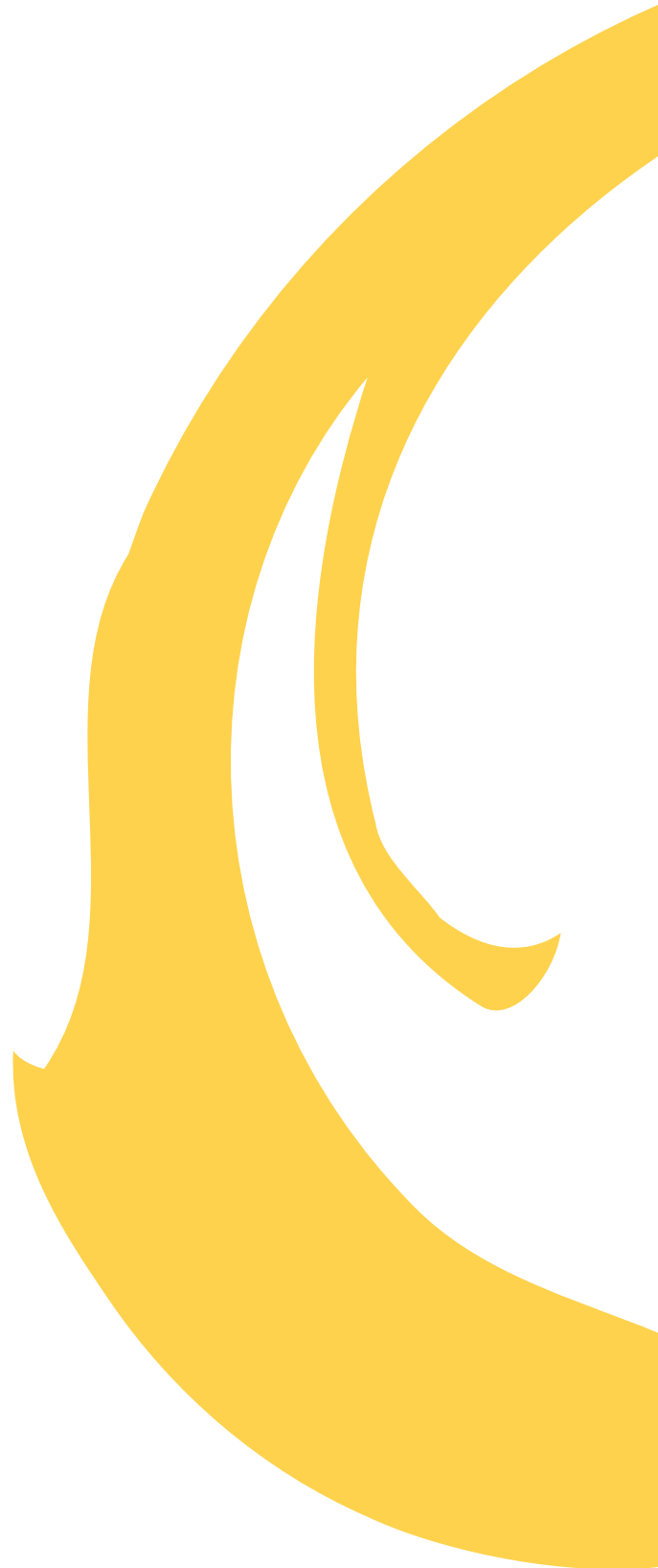
Developing Emotional Intelligence

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The modern workplace is dominated by rational, logical, purposeful people meeting their daily challenges in a clear, concise and collaborative manner. Emotions are irrational, illogical and an unnecessary distraction from the main task of achieving revenue targets, reducing costs and satisfying customers. Sound familiar? You could be forgiven for mistaking this as an excerpt from a 1950s management journal, but how many of your work colleagues might subconsciously or even consciously share this view? Such views are the stuff of science fiction, the workplace is a social environment full of people who think and feel. Just think about the last time you dismissed a 'difficult' employee and recall how you felt before and after that event. To be human is to feel, emotional intelligence is all about understanding and working with this fact.

Most academics will agree that emotional intelligence (EI) concerns our ability to understand and manage emotions. They also agree that such abilities are essential to success in many occupations, the list is exhaustive but in general any job that involves working with people requires some degree of EI ability. A comprehensive body of global research since the late 1980s consistently supports this view (Reuven Bar-On, Jack Salovey, John Mayer, and Daniel Goleman are the most influential in this area). Academics differ, however, on the degree to which someone's EI is related to their temperament (or personality) versus the interpersonal skills they may have acquired throughout their life. This is the classic 'nature versus nurture' debate and has influenced the way academics have conceptualised, measured and developed EI.

Advocates of 'nature' traditionally focused on EI measurement and assessment. Many of these assessment tools have elements that correlate with aspects of personality, for example, emotional stability (or neuroticism), extroversion and conscientiousness. EI tools developed by Reuven Bar-On, Peter Salovey and John Mayer share these characteristics. Advocates of 'nurture' have developed models combining the essential or commonly accepted components of EI with more traditional competencies such as leadership, teamwork and customer service skills. These are described as 'mixed' models of EI. Daniel Goleman is a proponent of this approach.

In recent times, with the increased interest from the corporate sector, both schools of thought have promoted EI as an ability that can be developed. This is where the confusion, misrepresentation and exploitation of EI began. In the 1980s leaders of EI research like Reuven Bar-On were interested in EI in a more general context, for example, how people from all walks of life could improve their interpersonal relationships. As organisations expressed interest in EI, those like Daniel Goleman began to design mixed models to meet the corporate training and development agenda. Goleman, for example, adapted earlier work by Salovey and Mayer to capitalise on the growing interest in EI. Such commercial developments quickly raised the suspicions of many in the corporate sector. EI was gaining the undeserved reputation as the latest fad by aggressive consulting companies eager to cash in on the uneducated.

Passing fad or powerful tool?

Most criticism of EI follows three common themes – is EI really something new or just more of the same repackaged, can you really measure it and can it be developed?

The 'nothing new' argument has not been helped by the commercialisation of EI by large consulting companies. Mixed EI models are often little more than an attempt to promote existing training programs as 'EI friendly'. So in this regard, EI is certainly repackaged and misrepresented. The issue is that many consultants do not understand the EI concept and think of it as simply another competency or training program. If you ask those who see nothing new in EI to describe what it replaces then they often use terms like wisdom and maturity. Some also talk in behavioural terms such as good interpersonal, social or communication skills.

Wisdom is a useful way to view EI. Wisdom is not a competency or behaviour in a technical sense. It does, however, suggest an ability often learned over a period of time, for some this can be a lifetime. In fact, most research suggests

that older people have higher levels of EI than younger people. Consider someone described as a wise leader. Typically they display all the behaviours one would expect from a competency perspective, for example, effective listening, influencing and decision-making skills. But in addition, they possess more subtle abilities that underpin these leadership competencies, for example, patience, self-control and the ability to make sound decisions when they don't always have all the information. EI works in a similar way as wisdom and can be described as a set of abilities that underpin or support higher order behaviours. The novice salesperson can ask good questions and clearly present product benefits, but seasoned salespeople know when a customer is really interested in buying or just wasting their time. So in a sense EI like wisdom is nothing new. What is new relates to the next two points – measuring and developing EI.

Reuven Bar-On is widely credited with developing the first scientific measure of EI, he actually coined the term 'emotional quotient' in 1985. This was scientific in the sense that it was a well researched, reliable and valid measure of a theoretical EI model. Many EI tools, of varying quality, have been developed since. Some researchers have attempted to develop a definitive measure by establishing the common elements from a number of contemporary EI tools, for example, Con Stough and Benjamin Palmer. Others have started from a theoretical basis and tested this through workplace research, for example, Victor Dulewicz and Malcolm Higgs. What is new is the fact that EI is more clearly defined and measurable using sound scientific methods. Some measures are more robust than others and some are truer to the essence of EI, namely pure versus mixed models.

Developing EI is the aim of the exercise but is often neglected in the quest to accurately describe and measure it. Measurement has often been seen as an end in itself versus a means to an end. This has been the primary focus of academics since the 1990s and accordingly it has skewed much of the earlier EI work in the direction of research and instrument validation with relatively little research into developing EI. Goleman was instrumental in shifting this focus from academia into workplace application through his publications and speaking engagements. Naturally, the academic world have often criticised his work from a scientific perspective, in particular the commercialisation of a mixed model that over-extends the original EI concept.

In theory developing EI is no more or less problematic than developing other competencies. Your ability to learn how to manage anger is no different than learning how to give and receive feedback. What matters in both examples is your level of self-awareness, your motivation to learn and the activities you undertake to learn and reinforce new behaviours. However, in practice your capacity for self-awareness has an important implication for developing some aspects of EI more so than most other higher order behaviours. Your ability to comprehend and reframe internal thought processes is essential for learning strategies to manage your emotions. Another factor in relation to developing EI is its relationship to personality. Someone who is highly impulsive, for example, may find it difficult to implement effective strategies for managing inappropriate emotions. However, the same could be said of their ability to apply appropriate leadership or interpersonal behaviours in certain situations.

The field of psychology has made a major contribution to our understanding and measurement of EI yet it hasn't fully contributed to the task of developing it. Whereas cognitive behaviour theory has played an important role in clinical practice it has been slow to gain a foothold in the corporate sector. This 'thinking-feeling' framework shows the greatest potential in terms of developing EI. Strategies that help people understand the relationship between their thoughts, emotions and behaviours have considerable power in helping them gain control of their emotions and therefore improve their interpersonal effectiveness. There are clear advantages in terms of improving workplace relationships, sales performance and leadership skills. Traditional training and development programs have neglected this approach. EI can be developed, but to get lasting results requires strategies borrowed from cognitive behaviour theory at the individual level applied in a change management framework at the organisational level.

Developing EI in organisations

The surest way to reinforce EI as a fad is to suggest that organisations need to 'do EI'. Developing EI just for the sake of it serves little purpose other than to position it as something new on the training menu. To do so is to encourage disappointment and eventual disinterest. EI development needs to target real-life learning needs addressing higher order behaviours, for example, leadership, sales or relationship skill development. There are five key stages to maximising any investment in EI development.

1. Position

There must be a legitimate business reason for investing in EI development, to ignore this only serves to reinforce EI as a passing fad. Success starts with a clear business case and a compelling argument that is fully developed and well communicated. The business need must be well researched and a clear link established between the desired behaviour change and EI development as the way to achieve this. For example, improving the quality and timeliness of performance feedback can have a positive impact on staff motivation, productivity and retention. Managers with higher EI are more likely to give feedback in a proactive, genuine and relaxed manner. Such behaviours encourage staff buy-in and commitment to improved performance. Effective positioning must establish a strong link between business performance, behaviour change and the role EI can play in achieving this.

2. Measure

Measuring someone's level of EI is an effective way to further encourage buy-in to the development process. Achievement or goal orientation is a quality most high performers share. A base-line EI measure gives such people a starting point that allows them to set their own target for development. This can provide considerable motivation since it allows self-assessment rather than not knowing one's current capability, or worse still, having someone else pass judgement on this. The use of self-measure or 360-degree tools can be invaluable in achieving self-awareness of strengths and gaps. Used effectively, such tools can help establish insight into one's behaviours and the impact they have on others. This can help make subsequent development activities more relevant to individual needs rather than targeting generic learning at a group level.

Some thought needs to be given to the use of self-measure versus 360-degree tools. The wrong choice can damage participant buy-in. The irony here is that most people have an emotional reaction when they receive feedback, those with low emotional self-awareness are often the most resistant. The common risk comes from the defensive reaction people have when they receive feedback incongruent with the way they view themselves. This can stifle motivation to learn as the person deals with this unwelcomed information. This is always a risk with any 360-degree tool and can kill a development initiative before it really starts. A self-measure is often less confrontational since it relates to one's self-perception of how they typically understand and manage emotions in the workplace. This approach greatly reduces the risk of a defensive reaction. As a general principal, a self-measure will work best in an environment where people are unfamiliar with 360-degree tools, work in a culture that is highly politicised or where people are known to have difficulty accepting feedback.

Objectivity in self-measurement is often compromised since people may consciously or sub-consciously over or under rate their level of ability. This is a problem with most EI self-measures since the questions are relatively transparent and people can manipulate their results if they so desire. If objectivity is a major concern then a standard impression management tool can be used concurrently to assess self-report objectivity.

The desire to achieve 360-degree feedback, and therefore a more objective assessment, at the expense of achieving maximum buy-in should be avoided. Buy-in once lost is near impossible to regain and objectivity is a poor substitute when people are angry, confused or hurt by the perceptions of their colleagues. It's important to always keep in mind that any EI tool is simply an aid to the development process, it provides some valuable information but it doesn't of

itself improve someone's EI abilities. When selecting an EI tool ensure that the various questions relate to the work environment, that it has some scientific validity and that it is quick and easy to administer. The instrument must target the definitive EI elements rather than mixing additional higher order behaviours, such as leadership or customer service skills.

3. Feedback

Feedback is the process of making sense of the self-measure or 360-degree data. Most EI tools generate some form of standard computer generated report, individual customisation is rare. The quality of presentation and information varies. Some are overly simplistic while others are swamped in detail. Interpretation can be difficult when a report contains excessive data or is poorly structured. You need to consider not only your EI tool in terms of the questionnaire but also the types of reports that can be generated. Despite what some consultants may try to tell you, all EI results are contextual. No psychological measure yet invented can promise to be 100 per cent accurate in describing, let alone predicting, human behaviour. This means that every report is situational and requires interpretation of the results in light of the individual and his or her work environment.

Facilitated feedback is best practice since it avoids misinterpretation which can further damage participant buy-in. A qualified facilitator helps people relate their feedback to real-life examples and therefore develop some degree of insight into their behaviours and their impact on others. A well focused debrief session lays the ground work for an individual plan of action for leveraging EI strengths and working to improve relevant EI abilities. Ideally these areas for development are self-selected. The facilitator helps the respondent explore the meaning and implications of the report so they can form their own opinions as to their EI strengths and gaps. This is a more client-centric approach than facilitator-centric and reinforces the fact that any EI report is simply a 'working hypothesis', it proposes possible explanations but is not an all encompassing truth. The respondent needs to consider the results in light of their own situation, experience and events. An experienced facilitator can be invaluable in helping to achieve this quickly and with minimal confusion.

Facilitators for debrief purposes need to be well versed in the use of the applicable EI tool. Most reputable tools require attendance at an accreditation program or at least a minimum level qualification for interpretation, for example, a registered psychologist or experienced HR professional. Facilitators must have well developed skills in working one-to-one and always strive to maintain a confidential, caring and non-judgemental environment. As a general principal, 360-degree feedback should always be provided one-to-one. Delivering 360-degree feedback in a group environment introduces numerous barriers to individual development. The most significant is the individual's level of comfort in disclosing their results. It is important to keep in mind the impact of peer group pressure, both at a conscious and subconscious level, and weigh up the advantages versus disadvantages for pursuing group disclosure. Individual EI development does not depend on group awareness, only self-awareness. There is little to be gained in making people feel uncomfortable, sensitive or resentful of their EI results. Not only can this affect the buy-in process but it can also be emotionally damaging to people who may be vulnerable at that time. This is a real risk in a group environment where a facilitator may be unaware of individual circumstances and untrained in dealing with mental health issues.

4. Develop

This is the main objective and traditionally the area of most activity in terms of EI development programs. These approaches usually take the form of group training activities or more recently one-to-one coaching. However, such traditional approaches neglect the preparatory activities addressing participant buy-in and individual customisation. Measuring EI and providing one-to-one feedback helps personalise the learning experience and is a powerful motivator for self-development. Effective development projects incorporate these earlier phases into program design. Well designed and highly relevant workshops incorporating workplace specific case studies, behavioural modelling, simulations and customised role plays are proven methods for developing EI abilities. One-to-one or small group coaching is an ideal review and reinforcement mechanism to help harvest new behaviours in the workplace. Coaching has been underutilised

as a workshop reinforcement activity yet has a major role to play in developing EI. Major behaviour change can be achieved in as few as four one-hour coaching sessions.

5. Re-measure

'What gets measured gets done'. Having a base-line measure is an effective way to gauge achievement and act as a motivator for goal oriented people. Consolidated or group reporting can also be provided to validate the effectiveness of any development initiative. In addition, group profiles can be developed and provide companies with a benchmark of EI abilities needed at different management levels or job families. Effective re-measurement relies on well designed EI tools which further highlights the need for valid, reliable and well researched instruments. Any variation in EI ability needs to be attributed to individual development rather than variations in the reliability of the tool.

Before you start

A common reason for many EI programs failing to deliver lasting results can be attributed to an over-emphasis on EI as the objective rather than the higher order behaviours that need to be developed, for example, leadership skills or interpersonal effectiveness. Emotional intelligence can be viewed as the underlying abilities that support these more visible workplace behaviours.

Most corporate programs focus on the training event or workshop, success depends less on the workshop and more about gaining buy-in and personalising the learning experience prior to the training or coaching activity. This can be achieved through well targeted positioning, effective measurement and confidential one-to-one feedback. In a sense EI is nothing new, however, the concept is now better defined, can be more accurately measured and is capable of being developed by those who have insight, motivation and a robust learning strategy.

Recommended Reading

Bar-On, R. & Parker, J. 2000, The Handbook of Emotional Intelligence: Theory, Development, Assessment, and Application at Home, School and in the Workplace, Jossey Bass.

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