

Emotional Intelligence at Work

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Emotional intelligence is a set of interrelated skills involving “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer and Salovey, 1997, p. 10). With little empirical support, people have claimed that “... emotional intelligence may be the best predictor of success in life, redefining what it means to be smart” (TIME, 1995, Cover), and that emotional intelligence will confer “...an advantage in any domain in life, whether in romance and intimate relationships or picking up the unspoken rules that govern success in organisational politics” (Goleman, 1995, p. 36). Recent research has, however, shown that emotional intelligence is related to life satisfaction and relationship quality (Ciarrochi, Chan, and Caputi, 2000) and in the workplace, emotional intelligence has been shown to be related to the employees’ job satisfaction and job performance (Wong and Law, 2002). And, in addition, if leaders and managers in an organisation have high emotional intelligence, the job satisfaction, job performance, and organisational citizenship behaviour of employees in the organisation will be enhanced.

This article on emotional intelligence at work is divided into four main sections. First, the article explores what emotional intelligence is. Secondly, there is a discussion on whether emotional intelligence is a distinct and useful construct. The third section looks at the benefits of emotional intelligence at work, and finally, there is a discussion on the effects of leader and manager’s emotional intelligence on employees in organisations and the benefits to overall organisational effectiveness.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional Intelligence has its roots in the concept of “social intelligence” that was first identified by Thorndike in 1920. Thorndike defined social intelligence as “the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls – to act wisely in human relations.” Following Thorndike, Gardner (1993) included social intelligence as one of the seven intelligence domains in his theory of multiple intelligences. According to Gardner, social intelligence is comprised of a person’s intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. Intrapersonal intelligence relates to one’s intelligence in dealing with oneself, and is the ability to “symbolize complex and highly differentiated sets of feelings”. In contrast, interpersonal intelligence relates to one’s intelligence in dealing with others and is the ability to “notice and make distinctions among other individuals and, in particular, among their moods, temperaments, motivations and intentions” (p. 239).

Salovey and Mayer (1990) were among the earliest to propose the name “emotional intelligence” to represent the ability of people to deal with their emotions. They defined emotional intelligence as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). Recently, Goleman (1995) adopted Salovey and Mayer’s definition, and Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) propose that emotional intelligence involves leadership competencies that can be categorized as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

In 1997, Mayer and Salovey formulated a revised definition of emotional intelligence. They pointed out that their “earlier definition now seemed vague in places and impoverished in the sense that they talk only about perceiving and regulating emotion, and omit thinking about feelings” (p. 10). They put forward a revised definition which they say corrects these problems, and state that emotional intelligence is a set of interrelated skills involving “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express

emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p. 10).

Is It a Distinct and Useful Construct?

When the notion of emotional intelligence was developed and defined, many questions were raised. Could emotional intelligence be measured, was the measure reliable and valid, was it distinct from traditional IQ, and would it correlate with measures that would theoretically be considered related to emotional intelligence.

A number of measures were then developed to measure emotional intelligence. One such measure is the Multi-factor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS), which was designed to measure the aspects of emotional intelligence as outlined above by Mayer and Salovey (1997). Ciarroci, Chan, and Caputi (2000) evaluated the emotional intelligence construct using the MEIS, and they found support for the reliability and validity of the test. They also found that overall emotional intelligence was not related to traditional IQ, women scored higher than men, (other research showed that women are slightly superior to men in perceiving emotions, Mayer and Geher, 1996; Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey, 1999), and that high emotional intelligence was related to empathy, openness to feelings, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and relationship quality. Emotional intelligence was also related to people’s ability to manage their moods, and they concluded that emotional intelligence is a distinctive and useful construct.

However, the causal link underlying some of those positive relationships is not clear. For example, are low emotional intelligent people less skilled at managing their emotion because they are low in self-esteem, or are they low in self-esteem in part because they are not good at managing their emotions? In addition, it seems reasonable to assume that low emotional intelligence leads to lower life satisfaction and relationship quality, but the causal direction of these relationships could also plausibly go the other way. For example, perhaps when people are in a difficult relationship or life situation they become less skilled at perceiving and managing their emotions (Ciarrochi et al., 2000).

Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

In relation to emotional intelligence in the workplace, organisations are settings that require interpersonal interaction. Most of these interactions are related to the performance of job duties, for example, serving customers, receiving instructions and reporting to supervisors, working with a team and cooperating and coordinating with colleagues, and working with other teams throughout an organisation. Employees with high levels of emotional intelligence should be able to master these interactions in a more effective manner. Without any empirical evidence, Goleman (1998) argued that emotional intelligence is related to job performance. And Ashkanasy and Hooper (1999) have argued that the showing of positive emotion is associated with a high likelihood of success at work.

Recent empirical research supports those claims. Wong and Law (2002) found that employee's emotional intelligence was positively related to their level of job satisfaction and job performance. Therefore, if an individual was high in emotional intelligence, there was a much greater chance that they would be happier in their jobs and also perform better. And in another recent study, Lam and Kirby (2002) investigated the impact of emotional and general intelligence on individual performance. Specifically, they investigated whether emotional intelligence would account for increases in individual cognitive-based performance over and above the level attributable to traditional general intelligence. They found that, as expected, general intelligence made a significant contribution to the prediction of individual performance of a cognitive task (Gottfredson, 1998). However, in addition, overall emotional intelligence uniquely explained individual cognitive-based performance over and beyond the level attributable to general intelligence.

It has been common belief that, when emotions are intertwined with role, performance, or both, they tend to interfere with task achievement (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). However, Lam and Kirby (2002) point out that "because individuals with well-developed emotional intelligence are able to identify and control their own emotions and those of

others, they are less likely to be paralyzed by fear, hijacked by negative emotions, and strangled by anxiety, all of which have negative effects on both individual and team performance (Seipp, 1991). Conversely, people may use the same control to channel positive emotions and use them to achieve maximum personal engagement and productivity in themselves” (p. 138).

Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

To be an effective leader or manager, a person needs the ability to use knowledge and to make things happen. These can be called competencies, which Boyatzis (1982) defined as “the underlying characteristics of a person that lead to or cause effective and outstanding performance” (p. 21). Whether direct empirical research is reviewed (Boyatzis, 1982; Bray, Campbell and Grant, 1974; Howard and Bray, 1988; Kotter, 1982; Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988; Thornton & Byham, 1982) or meta-analytic syntheses are used (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970; Goleman, 1998; Spencer and Spencer, 1983), there are a set of competencies that have been shown to cause or predict outstanding leader and manager performance (Boyatzis, Stubbs, and Taylor, 2002). Regardless of author or study, they tend to include three clusters: (1) Cognitive or intellectual ability, such as systems thinking; (2) self-management or intrapersonal abilities, such as adaptability; and (3) relationship management or interpersonal abilities, such as networking. The latter two clusters make up what is called emotional intelligence competencies (Goleman, 1998).

Leadership involves the interaction of leaders with other individuals. Leadership is embedded in a social context. Once social interactions are involved, emotional awareness and emotional regulation become important factors affecting the quality of interactions. Good leaders need to have a good understanding of their own emotions and those of others, and be able to regulate their own emotions when interacting with others. Leaders need to play different roles at different times, and more importantly, good leaders have the ability to select the right roles for the situation.

In addition, supervisors with high emotional intelligence and emotional maturity are more likely to use supportive behaviour and treat their followers with psychological benefits, such as approval, respect, esteem and affection, as they are more sensitive to feelings and emotions of themselves and their followers (Wong and Law, 2002). There is evidence (Fisher and Edwards, 1988) that the supportive behaviour of leaders has a positive effect on the job satisfaction of followers. Dansereau et al. (1995) have shown that leaders are able to affect the performance of their subordinates by supporting their feelings of self-worth. Wong and Law (2002) found that leader emotional intelligence affects the job satisfaction and organisational citizenship behaviour of followers. Organisational citizenship behaviour is “individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promoted the effective functioning of the organisation” (Organ, 1988). Examples of organisational citizenship behaviour include volunteering for overtime when needed, and representing the organisation favourably to others outside the organisation.

And finally, the author has recently conducted research as part of an MSc Programme in Work & Organisational Psychology at Dublin City University Business School in a number of manufacturing organisations in Ireland, including large American multi-national organisations and owner-managed organisations. The results showed that if team leaders, managers and directors have high emotional intelligence, the job performance and organisational citizenship behaviour of employees in their teams will be significantly enhanced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, emotional intelligence is a set of interrelated skills involving “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer and Salovey, 1997, p. 10). Highly emotional intelligent individuals are more likely to have higher levels of empathy, openness to feelings, greater self-esteem, life satisfaction and relationship quality. At work, emotional intelligence is related to job

satisfaction and job performance. And, if leaders and managers in an organisation have high emotional intelligence, the job performance and organisational citizenship behaviour of individuals in the organisation will be enhanced.

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Profile

Evelyn is a Consultant Work & Organisational Psychologist, a Psychotherapist, and a Business and Executive Coach. She is joint Director of Coach Institute of Ireland and Galway Leadership Center. Evelyn has an Honours Degree in Psychology from the National University of Ireland, Galway, (NUIG) and a First Class Honours Masters in Work & Organisational Psychology from Dublin City University. She trained in Psychotherapy at the Tracht Psychotherapy Centre in Kinvara, Co. Galway. Evelyn has worked at a senior level with World Class Organisations, and her current clients include individuals, groups and organisations from both the public and private sector. She is a Registered Psychologist with the Psychological Society of Ireland (P.S.I.), a Fellow of the Irish Institute of Training & Development (I.I.T.D.), a member of the Association for Coaching (A.C.), and an accredited member of the Irish Association for Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy (I.A.H.I.P.). In addition, Evelyn has conducted research on Leadership and Emotional Intelligence and has lectured on Organisational Change in the Department of Management in NUIG. She is currently doing a Professional Doctorate in Consultation and the Organisation with the Tavistock Centre in London. She can be contacted at Coach Institute of Ireland, No. 1 Devon Place, The Crescent, Galway.

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