

Emotional Intelligence – The Key to Successful Working Relationships – Patrick Psaila

Numerous research studies conclude that if we want to become very successful in our careers and the rest of our life, it is not enough for us to have sound technical knowledge, effective organizational skills and good strategic thinking. We also need to be able to navigate the complex waters of human relationships. This is especially true when it comes to being effective in positions of leadership and management. We can easily think of various examples of highly intelligent professionals who may be considered as technical or academic geniuses and yet struggle to connect and communicate effectively with those around them. In order to be truly effective in any position of influence we need to be sensitive to the relationships we create with others, we need to be aware of our own strengths and vulnerabilities, and be able to communicate with honesty, clarity, and openness. If we want to inspire and motivate others we need to know how to communicate with the language of emotion and feel comfortable dealing with intense emotions created by anger, conflict, disappointment, failure and fatigue. In other words, effective leadership today requires high levels of “emotionally intelligence” and the competencies associated with it. Emotionally intelligent leadership is now considered as the major factor that determines the extent to which employees are motivated to work well and feel proud and happy to be part of their company and whether teams function effectively and truly support each other and the organisation.

Since the 1990’s various researchers provided us with a number of definitions and measures of emotionally intelligence. A comprehensive way of describing emotional intelligence from an ability perspective is by viewing it as the capacity to identify, use, understand and manage emotions in oneself and others in any situation. The first two abilities are identifying and using emotions in oneself, that is, on an intrapersonal level. These are considered to be experiential skills in emotional intelligence and require a significant degree of self-awareness. This involves being connected to our inner state of mind in such a way that we can name the emotions we are experiencing at any point during the day. This in turn can enable us to use this emotion to inform our thinking, decision making and actions. For example, if we are

preparing to meet someone who makes us feel uncomfortable, it is important for us to identify how exactly we are feeling prior to the meeting and how we are most likely to feel during the meeting. So in this case, if we identify emotions of apprehension, and threat, this “emotional data” can help us understand that our perception of the person and the interaction during the meeting may be filtered and possibly distorted because of the way we feel about that person. This emotionally intelligent insight may lead us to take the decision not to reach any definite conclusions during the meeting so that we can think things through and possibly discuss them with a trusted colleague before making a decision. This apparently simple process can increase the chances of a successful outcome in this situation.

Emotionally intelligent people recognize that no matter how hard they try to remain objective, their emotional states influence their perception and judgement so they make sure that they allow sufficient time and engage appropriate mechanisms to process their emotions before taking action or making significant decisions. This key ability can help us in all areas that require decision making in our lives such as when we are making significant financial investments, embarking on new career paths, committing ourselves to long-term relationships and major life decisions that have a strong impact on our future.

The next two abilities are understanding and managing emotions. These are considered to be strategic skills in emotional intelligence and involve knowing why we feel the way we do and how best to act in order to manage ourselves better. So if we refer to the previous example, we may realize that the reason why the person we are meeting gives us feelings of threat and mistrust is because of a reputation this person has and not because of personal experience. This may lead us to postpone our judgement about this person and while keeping our eyes open for potential deception or manipulation we do not automatically conclude that this person is behaving in this way.

These four abilities can also be applied on an interpersonal level, in other words, using our emotional intelligence to identify, use, understand and manage emotions in other people. For example, we may identify that our team members are feeling demoralized and demotivated during a meeting, use that information by acknowledging how their emotional state could be influencing their judgement,

understand why they feel that way and empathise with them, and take decisions and actions that could help to raise their morale and increase motivation. This could simply take the form of encouragement, appreciation and praise, three behaviours that I like to refer to as the EAP of motivating others.

One common question that is often asked about emotional intelligence is whether we are born with this intelligence or whether it is something that one can learn over time. Scientists acknowledge that genetics are likely to play an important role in the development of emotional intelligence in individuals. However, geneticists also acknowledge that learning and experience have significant impact in shaping our gene expression. There is a strong body of research that suggests that with serious commitment, sustained effort and proper training, social and emotional competencies can improve over a period of time. Moreover, studies in the field of affective neuroscience reveal that the brain circuitry of emotion exhibits a fair degree of plasticity, even in adulthood. These findings suggest that while it is unlikely that scores on an emotional intelligence test are going to differ significantly over a period of time, with effective training programmes and strong personal effort we can develop and improve our ability to behave in an emotionally intelligent way and as a result increase our effectiveness in our social, personal and working arenas.

This is one reason, for example, why Google created a seven week programme on emotional intelligence which they called “Search Inside Yourself” for all members of staff who assume any form of leadership position in the company. The programme focuses on self-awareness and self-mastery, attention training, compassionate leadership and influencing others with insight and is now attended by people from organisations all around the world.