

More than a feeling: the rise of Emotional Intelligence

Emotion has long been something of a taboo subject in the workplace. It's widely seen as inherently negative – it clouds decision-making; it's a source of weakness; it should be left at home. But recent changes in business and the wider world have caused a seismic shift in how people view emotion and appreciate its power when used intelligently.

One of the root causes is that the composition of the workforce has changed vastly over a relatively short period. It has become far more diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, gender and sexuality. And a gap has opened up, especially between members of the older generations who run most organisations and the millennials and gen Z-ers who work for them when it comes to personal values and expectations of employment.

Tellingly, *The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019* has found that millennials (defined by the researchers as those born between January 1983 and December 1994) and gen Z-ers (born January 1995 to December 1999) are mistrustful of businesses that prioritise their own agendas over their impact on society. Many respondents said that they wouldn't hesitate to cut ties with any firm that didn't share their values.

Different strokes

Employers therefore need to appeal to people with hugely differing motivations in order to attract and retain talent.

"The reality of the manager has changed. No two employees are the same, so a 'one size fits all' approach is not going to cut it," says IoD member Anna Rasmussen.

Experts believe that leaders cannot rely on intellect alone when it comes to motivating a diverse workforce. Simon Haslam, FMR Research explains: "Organisations are moving away from strict hierarchies to more distributed forms of leadership and agile styles of working. With this model, you can no longer rely on conventional manifestations of power in order to be effective."

While it's easily tested and widely understood, conventional intelligence is only the tip of the iceberg, according to Haslam. "When you study leadership effectiveness, IQ isn't a determinant. The stuff that's below the waterline is," he says. "Research is now intimating that the biggest quality of leadership performance is **Emotional Intelligence.**"

Also known as EQ, emotional intelligence is typically split into four "competencies": self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and relationship management. A 2016 research report by Development Dimensions revealed that leaders who displayed emotionally

intelligent behaviour performed 40 per cent better than those who didn't in numerous disciplines, including planning and decision-making.

Yet EQ appears to be an elusive quality. In the February/March issue of *Director*, retail guru Mary Portas argued that many leaders she'd met had shown "a huge lack of empathy". She extolled the virtues of "putting your true values at the heart of your work and connecting with your inner frequency" – in other words, "working like a decent human being".

Business leaders may think that they're emotionally intelligent, but they often fall short in this respect, argues Haslam,. He has observed that many people who have made it to the top of their organisations have done so not because they're exceptional leaders, but because they're driven managers.

Baggage handling

"Emotional intelligence enables you to see the whole person, not just the work person, and really understand them," says Rosie Warin, "It's also about being aware of your own emotional baggage, so that you're able to make decisions without being unduly affected by this."

Warin, recalls one case where good intentions failed to translate into action. "I worked with someone who said she wanted a more empowered organisation – less hierarchical, more bottom-up. But any time there was trouble, she would revert to type and become dictatorial."

Such examples are common, but it seems the problem is not that leaders with underdeveloped EQ are fundamentally incapable of making measured decisions or have feelings of ill-will toward their employees. Instead, their actions appear to be disproportionately affected by their state of mind. Haslam explains: "The typical human makes several thousand decisions a day, most of them subconsciously and instinctively. The emotionally intelligent leader is very good at understanding how they are likely to act in particular situations, intervening and appropriately modifying that for the context."

The many stresses of running a business mean that losing your temper with a colleague, say, or disregarding a disgruntled employee's complaint is typical behaviour among leaders. "Most business is common sense. The hard bit is the relationships, the emotional resilience and coming back from the knocks," Warin says.

Start with yourself

Recent research by the University of Cambridge indicates that only 10 per cent of the variation in empathy levels in different people is down to genetics. Other studies have discovered that women are more empathetic than men but have found no genetic basis

for the difference. This strongly suggests that the elements of EQ can be learnt and developed.

Self-awareness should be the first of the four to work on, according to Daniel Goleman, co-chairman of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University, New Jersey. He believes that self-awareness “is the fundamental emotional competence on which others, such as emotional self-control, build.”

John Hackston, a chartered psychologist at the Myers-Briggs Company, agrees. “Once you understand where you are coming from, you can start to understand how other people differ from you and then think about how you can work together,” he says.

Hackston recommends **engaging a professional coach** if you’re aiming to hone self-awareness. Haslam and Warin also favour seeking objective criticism, whether that comes from a coach, a mentor or even friends and relatives. Other useful tools for building self-awareness include 360-degree feedback and mindfulness practice in its many forms.

“I spend a lot of time reflecting on how I react to situations – whether I’ve responded in the correct way or whether I’ve acted on an impulse that was to do with something else,” Warin says. “You need to work on really understanding your emotions, how they play out and what triggers you, so that you can say: ‘OK, this is my issue. I need to ignore it right now and come back to it later,’ instead of reacting in the moment.”

See and be seen

Hackston suggests that, once a leader understands themselves, they can then set about understanding others and bringing out the best in them. Displaying empathy (the ability to “project yourself into what you observe”) is vital for keeping your team engaged, motivated and happy – and is therefore intrinsically linked to productivity.

As Rasmussen observes: “If you have a team of people who are misunderstood and misaligned, productivity is going to be sporadic.” To help your employees achieve their goals as well as those of the business, “you need to meet them in their world

Encouraging your employees to bring their “whole selves” to work will enable you to get a clearer picture of their personalities, their motivations and their struggles

Experts believe that leaders must set an example by revealing more of their true selves to their employees. Doing so will not only foster a happier culture, but also instil trust. As Brené Brown, the professor of social work whose 2010 TEDx talk on “the power of vulnerability” has been viewed 41 million times, says: “In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen – really seen.”

According to Warin, . “People are very complicated. They bring a huge range of emotions and experiences to the workplace. Just as you can’t do a good day’s work when you’ve had an argument with your partner or fallen out with a friend, neither can anyone else.”

There are already employees that give access to a wellbeing coach, which Warin claims has had a profound effect on many of them, most of whom have never had that type of support before.

A study last year by management consultancy Korn Ferry found that leaders displaying high EQ could hope to retain 69 per cent of their employees for five years, compared with 42 per cent for those showing low EQ. The research concluded that leaders with empathy, conflict-management skills and emotional self-awareness create the optimum climate for their people to thrive.

Despite the growing reliance on technology and data by businesses seeking an edge in increasingly competitive and uncertain markets, the future of work looks decidedly human. And the leaders who successfully navigate the turbulent seas ahead will be the ones who know that it’s the stuff below the waterline that really counts.

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Hannah Gresty