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Raising Effectiveness Using Emotional Intelligence

Many business leaders have found intriguing the basic idea that success is strongly influenced by personal qualities such as perseverance, self-control and working well with others. They point to sales people who have an uncanny ability to sense what is most important to the client, customer service employees who excel in helping angry patrons calm down and be more reasonable. Conversely, they point to brilliant executives who do everything well except get along with people, and to managers who are technically brilliant but cannot handle stress.

Studies have confirmed that soft skills are critical for a vital economy. For instance, the influential report on Achieving Necessary Skills by the United States Secretary of Labor's Commission argued that a high-performance workplace requires workers who have a solid foundation in literacy and computation. They also need personal qualities such as responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity and honesty. Emotional intelligence is the basis for these competencies.

But what exactly is "emotional intelligence?" What is the link between that and organizational effectiveness? Is it possible for adults to become more socially and emotionally competent? And finally, what is the best way to help individuals achieve this?



Defining the Term and Its Importance

Emotional intelligence is the ability to accurately identify and understand one's own emotional reactions and those of others. It includes the ability to regulate one's emotions and to use them to make good decisions and act effectively. EI provides the bedrock for many competencies that are critical for effective performance in the workplace such as one's effectiveness in influencing others through the ability to connect on an emotional level. To effectively influence others, we also need to be able to manage our own emotions and have empathy for others.

Best Course to Improvement

To be effective, you need to begin with the realization that emotional learning differs from the cognitive and technical kind in some important ways. Emotional capacities like self-confidence and empathy differ from cognitive abilities because they draw on different brain areas. Purely cognitive abilities are based in the neo-cortex. But with social and emotional competencies, additional brain areas are involved, mainly the circuitry that runs from the emotional centers to the prefrontal lobes. Effective learning for emotional competence has to retune these circuits.

Unfortunately, these particular neural circuits are especially difficult to modify. Emotional incompetence often results from habits learned early in life. These automatic habits are set in place as a normal part of living as experience shapes the brain. As people acquire their habitual repertoire of thought, feeling and action, the neural connections that support these are strengthened, becoming dominant pathways for nerve impulses. When these habits have been so heavily learned, the underlying neural circuitry becomes the brain's default option at any moment – what a person does automatically and spontaneously often with little awareness.

Because the neural circuits that need to be modified extend deep into the nonverbal parts of the brain, the learning ultimately must be experimental. Learning to control one's temper, for instance, is like learning to ride a bicycle. It is only by getting on a bike and riding it, falling over and trying again repeatedly that one ultimately masters the skill – practice, in short.

Elements to Developing

Because emotional learning differs from cognitive learning in a number of ways, training and development efforts need to incorporate a number of elements such as:

Practice

There needs to be much more opportunity for practice than what one normally sees in the typical work-based program. Not only does there need to be many opportunities in the training but you need to be able to practice with new ways of thinking and acting in other settings such as on the job, at home and with friends over a course of several months.

Ongoing Encouragement

Even with practice during the training phase, old neural pathways can reestablish themselves quickly unless learners are repeatedly encouraged and reinforced to use the new skills on the job. You need to provide periodic reinforcers and reminders to help participants maintain the fragile new patterns of behavior that they have so recently learned.

Management Backing

A learner's supervisors play an essential role in providing the support necessary for a successful change. Reinforcement by one's supervisor can be especially powerful in helping new emotional competencies to take root.

Special Training Required

Because the competencies involved in social and emotional learning are so central to our personal identities, special care and sensitivity is required in the way that training is presented. The personal nature of what is involved in this kind of learning also makes it critical that there be a trusting and supportive relationship between the learners and trainers.