

How Intelligent are we About Emotional Intelligence ?

Emotional Intelligence, emotional literacy or social and emotional awareness has been one of the boom business concepts since the late 1990s and it doesn't look like changing any time soon.

The realisation of managers and management academics that there is benefit to be had from *managing* emotion in the workplace came late but late but arrived with a bang. Until very recently indeed, core texts concerned with human behaviour in organizations were lacking any form of reflection on managers as emotional beings and the management of emotion as part of their role.

However, the worldwide impact of the work of Daniel Goleman¹ has been immense. Emotional intelligence is now somewhere on any MBA worth its salt and the vast majority of 'organizational development' consultants can emotionally profile your team at the flick of a switch. In addition and perhaps most significantly, there have been numerous articles that have linked emotional intelligence to leadership ability and therefore to career success. All of this means that *getting into feelings* is big business and emotional intelligence is emerging as a must have managerial skill.

The recognition of leaders' emotions and the management of emotion as a key topic for research, teaching and organizational development has been important, is entirely relevant and should be applauded. Nonetheless, the extraordinary speed with which the emotional intelligence concept has taken off and the extent to which numerous parties within the world of business have adopted the concept and its language does have a down side.

- Who is selling emotional intelligence ?
- What is for sale ?
- How intelligently are we reflecting on the whole enterprise ?

In 2000, a UK based management researcher² (Stephen Fineman) asked us to wonder about the extent to which emotional intelligence was being commoditised by the management and management consulting community. Then later in 2002, US-based consultant³ and importantly trained psychologist (Steven Berglas) questioned the calibre of some of the numerous 'coaches' that have sprung up in response to the stampede to be an emotionally intelligent leader.

¹ (Emotional Intelligence, 1996)

² Fineman.S. (2000) *Emotion in Organizations*, 2nd edition. Sage Publications, London.

³ Berglas.S. (2002) The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching. *Harvard Business Review* June, pp. 86-92.

The essence of both of these authors' arguments is worth rehearsing here in order to answer the question 'how intelligent are we about emotionally intelligence?'

Emotional Intelligence is generally considered to be

*"the ability to sense, understand and effectively apply the power and acumen of emotions as a source of human energy information, connection and influence"*⁴

Decoded, this means that an emotionally intelligent manager is self aware, is socially skilled, empathic, resilient, self motivated, assertive, can make decisions intuitively and read other people's emotions pretty well. Basically, treats people like human beings but is open and honest enough to have the difficult as well as the easy conversations and as a result exerts a lot of influence.

Stephen Fineman points out that in the hard sell that emotional intelligence has received in recent years, little room has been left for reflection on the extent to which it is a good thing or not. He points out that this attractive concept (become a master of feelings and become a masterful manager) has its dangers. Principally he asks the question what of the emotionally unintelligent and is there a role for stereo-typically emotionally unintelligent management and leadership ?

For instance, surely there are a range of behaviours and leadership styles that fall outside of the remit of a leader who is acting against an emotionally intelligence brief focused around *positive mental attitude*. For instance the *telling / autocratic* leadership style some researchers argue is appropriate (in situations where those being managed have limited skills, limited desire to self manage and work independently) does not necessarily need highly-displayed and carefully choreographed empathy.

Fineman also points out that emotional intelligence as been sold as an 'over-idealised' brand of psychology and is concerned for those who become labelled as not emotionally intelligent enough. To be labelled as such (whether that is a valid value-judgment or not) has psychological impacts that are considerably more profound than being rated on other managerial skills such as being a strategic thinker or effective communicator. The *pathologizing* effect of judging a leader's emotional competence raises questions about the relationship between employer and employee. That is, there is more potential for a value judgement made about an individual as an employee of an organization to seep into that individual's life outside of that organization if it concerns their emotional life rather than their time keeping or numerical skills etc. The extent to which this is fully reflected and dealt with responsibly by buyers and sellers in the emotional intelligence industry remains to be seen and leads on to the concerns of US-based researcher Steven Berglas.

⁴ (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997: p.xii).

In 2002, he offered his concerns about the emotional intelligence industry in a Harvard Business Review article discussing the meteoric increase in 'coaching' and emotional education in organizations. Essentially, his point is that an individual (coach) who is not a well trained and highly skilled psychology or psychotherapy practitioner can, in seeking to address an individual manager's emotional intelligence, do more damage than good.

This damage can occur in many ways. For example by re-enforcing an emotional trait (e.g. competitiveness) that may appear to be good for a short-term business need but in fact be very bad for the client / leader in the longer term or in another aspect of their life. Further, by seeking to remove what might be perceived as a negative emotional trait (e.g. extreme introversion in a leader, or aggressiveness) may take away from that individual a coping mechanism that is holding a lot of other emotional stability in place. It is not to say that such emotional reflection and re-education is not exactly the right thing to do and done well it will benefit both the coaching client and the business, but rather that it is a **skilled practitioner** that needs to work alongside an individual to do it.

It is certainly the case that there is a certain 'lure' around the concept of emotional intelligence that seems to promote easy answers and quick results by focusing on mantras of positive thinking and emotional editing to ensure one simply filters out negative emotions and focuses on the positive. This approach begs the question that any psychologist or psychotherapist would immediately ask: what then happens to the negative emotions where do they go and what do they turn into: they're certainly not likely to vanish into thin air.

Our view is that it is the role of trained, skilled and experienced psychological practitioners to help leaders build their own and others emotional strength and resilience and in so doing, it is our job to keep on asking intelligent questions about emotional intelligence.



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