

Humanising Business

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The concept of 'emotional intelligence' was popularised a decade ago but still many people, especially men, like to believe that it is a contradiction in terms; an oxymoron like the term 'fun-run'. Emotional intelligence (or EQ as it's better known) is defined as emotional maturity and a sound business case exists for getting to the heart of the matter; especially in commercial enterprises that have historically prized the purely rational.

Although many believe that business is about manipulating the rules of money, in reality the success of every commercial transaction boils down to the ability of human beings to interact effectively. While countless mission statements may extol the value of people being their most important asset, how many organisations truly consider staff as human beings, rather than as units of production? People behave predictably and everyone has buttons that can be pushed to get a good or bad reaction. So if humans are dealt with as numbers on a balance sheet or as mindless machines, why are business leaders surprised when this behaviour produces an uncooperative response?

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EQ calls attention to the necessity of emphasising the human component in business. It is commonly defined as a combination of our emotional and social skills and research into 500 US companies shows these to be key competencies important to success in almost any job. While not denying the role of rational thought, it is EQ skills that make the difference between average performance and high achievers.

The implications for leadership are significant and the more senior the leader, the more important EQ skills become. Daniel Goleman - the author who popularised the concept in the mid 90s – claims that most leaders are derailed due to deficiencies in this area. If leaders are unable to relate to people, their competency in managing processes becomes less and less effective.

On the other hand, 'star performers' show well developed levels of EQ and their leadership effectiveness is turbo-boosted by one specific rational component; big picture thinking.

Here visionary ability combined with well-developed social and emotional skills allows them to inspire performance out of staff members. Instead of the familiar 'kick-ass' style of management, inspiring people to perform at their best creates a more motivating environment.

Realistically no one can motivate or empower anyone else. The best that leadership can do is to create the right conditions for people to motivate and empower themselves. For team leaders who prefer to micro-manage others, this usually means getting out of their staff member's way.

Allied to this is the common leadership error of treating all individuals as if they were the same; but some may be team players while others operate better when functioning independently. So when it comes to developing relationships that work, EQ emphasises the need to get to know people; only then can one identify the right buttons to push to get a good reaction.

Missing Links

A startling statistic from the US Center for Quality Management shows that 50% of time wasted in business is due to lack of trust. Trust is the foundation upon which healthy relationships are built and without it leaders struggle to gain co-operation. The less collaboration they obtain the greater the likelihood of resorting to autocratic behaviour. But what autocrats fail to realise is that everyday staff members choose whether they are going to support or sabotage their leader.

So although an autocratic style may produce short-term results, over time it only generates reluctant compliance, making it all the harder for leaders to produce the results required of them.

Years ago futurists predicted that the more hi-tech the world became, the more important human connection would become. That future is now and in business this translates into considering people-centred principles and values in decision-making. Many businesses have attempted this by spending small fortunes on developing mission and value statements, but how many live according to their stated principles? In other words, are decisions underpinned by the vision and values or are they still based purely on financial considerations? Yet if executives do not follow-through with appropriate behaviour, the paper that mission statements are printed upon is worth more than the sentiment it is communicating.

Now, with big corporations being brought to their knees by moral and ethical considerations, it is becoming increasingly evident that decisions can no longer afford to be motivated by hard-hearted ideas. Instead of making money at all costs, we need to consider how different the world would be if decisions were motivated by more human considerations, like wisdom for instance?

This greater emphasis on our humanness makes good business sense because virtually every aspect of commerce involves dealing with people, and those with the most developed levels of EQ notch up the success stories. When EQ skills are sharpened, staff that interface directly with customers – in sales and service roles - show substantial improvements in performance.

They are better able to attract new business and retain valuable revenue-generating customers.

So too can improvements be found in team functioning. Team building involves more than a few rock-climbing and paint-ball sessions. A team is directly influenced by the emotions of its members, especially how moods and feelings impact upon interactions between the players. Instead of *spanbou* efforts that are difficult to integrate into the workplace, team development is a day-by-day building of skills; these are the abilities necessary to become more aware of behaviours – one's own and of others – and relationship management.

Each team member's attitude to power is also relevant, for when individuals do not feel forceful within themselves they attempt to manipulate situations by wielding power over other people. This kind of emotional immaturity disrupts team functioning and the more developed the level of EQ, the less the likelihood of this kind of manipulative behaviour occurring.

Old Habits Die Hard

While it may be accepted that EQ is known to be an important skill in business, questions have been raised as to whether adults are able to build upon the level of emotional and social skills already acquired (usually in childhood). But like any intelligence, EQ develops with life-experience and divided into two categories, the emotional quotient is relatively simple to understand. It involves i) the ability to manage oneself and ii) acquiring the knack of getting other people to co-operate with our plans. None of this is rocket-science but because EQ can often involve reversing habits of a lifetime, these so-called 'soft-skills' can be hardest to learn.

'But,' many people ask, 'how do these skills benefit business?' In the most crass sense, mastery in both categories translates into being able to get one's own way most of the time. This determines level of achievement but, of course, how one goes about it makes all the difference. Successful people seldom take 'no' for an answer not because they have greater intellectual gifts than others, but more as a consequence of their learnt ability to read situations accurately, and regulate their response accordingly.

In essence EQ skills are about recognising, understanding, and managing emotions personally as well as those of other people. So, instead of resorting to unconscious emotional habits developed early in life (knee-jerk responses like tantrums or sulking), successful people consciously draw upon a wide range of behaviours until they find the ones that work in each situation. To do so they need to have an accurate handle on their own moods and feelings; in EQ terminology this is called 'intrapersonal management'.

When it comes to self-management, emotions are not seen as touchy-feely annoying interferences. Rather, feelings are viewed as an intelligent form of feedback providing valuable information about what we want. For example, unhappiness is an emotion that tells us something is wrong and changes are needed. People who fail to make these changes become increasingly overwhelmed by their gloominess and this consumes their energy. On the other hand, those who respond to the feedback by changing their choices do not waste energy indulging their moods, so they have enough vitality to direct their efforts into making a productive contribution.

The balancing act

While many businesses may perceive the need for a 'happy' workforce, few pay more than lip service to the idea. Happiness is not about gormless staff cheerfully doing cartwheels down the passageway everyday; it is about experiencing balance in life.

This requires that our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs are met and, in business, it has implications for pressing issues such as work/life balance. A Canadian survey revealed that staff who reported striking the right work/life balance are achieving this through EQ skills like taking charge of their own lives and shifting their attitudes.

These attitudinal shifts involve more than making personal changes, however. They also include the need to question deeply held ideas about gender. This is important because although men and women's functions have changed appreciably, traditional mind-sets have not yet caught up with reality. Gender issues require education because when roles are shifting unrecognisably, they impact upon an individual's ability to apply their social and emotional skills to behave appropriately.

Many people naively hold the view that women are more likely to develop their emotional intelligence than men. This is simply stereotyping. From an early age boys are taught to suppress feelings while girls are encouraged to express them. So although the ability to recognise emotion may set women off from the starting blocks earlier, this same rearing process hammers a girl's self-esteem; one of the key pillars in building emotional intelligence. A boy's self-image is not damaged to the same extent by the process of rearing but he needs to learn to hear and respond to his feelings. So both men and women face emotional challenges, but the issues they have to address are different.

Allied to this in South Africa we are still facing the thornier side of diversity management. Ten years after liberation, open displays of racism and /or sexism are common in the South African workplace.

These prejudices reflect a poorly developed level of EQ and can only be addressed by implementing programmes that deal with the core emotional learning that drives such degrees of insensitivity.

Historical attitudes are also responsible for the high levels of negativity experienced in the country. Negativity is driven by personal insecurity which manifests as endless complaining; something that is drowning local businesses in pessimism. These emotionally **unintelligent** behaviours are akin to low levels of depression and, as anyone who has experienced a 'downer' will know, this state of mind makes it difficult to achieve anything. While the cynics may believe that optimism can have little more effect than that of re-arranging the deck-chairs on the sinking Titanic, hope and optimism have consistently been found to correlate positively with achievement.

African intelligence

EQ is also the only western ideology to capture the essence of the ancient African tradition of *ubuntu*. This translates into a deep-rooted knowledge of the fact that survival and success depend upon the support, care, help and understanding of other people. Whether in Johannesburg or New York the reality is the same, but it is only through EQ principles that westerners are starting to consciously recognise that ambitions won't be fulfilled purely because of our own personal striving.

The big difference between the cultures is what each society values; the western world emphasises the importance of money and power, while *ubuntu* prioritises people and community. Practically bringing the two together means using our lives to make a contribution. This is more than altruism because by adding value we in turn reap a host of personal benefits. Instead of individuals taking whatever they can get out of the system, imagine the extraordinary world that could be created if people focused their attention upon making a difference.

While all of this may sound like much to consider, when it comes to behaviour EQ – like *ubuntu* - boils down to being able to negotiate the conditions of one's life. The author Stephen Covey emphasises the importance of creating 'win-win' situations and those who are sufficiently astute in sizing up other people will have the information necessary to get their own way through negotiation. After all, when other people also get what they want they will more willingly go along with the person who is creating wins for them.

No speaks

As negotiation is based upon communication it makes sense that this too plays a critical role in behaving intelligently. Communication reveals moods, feelings and attitudes but few realise that at least 90% of the message is communicated non-verbally. So what we don't say reveals far more than the words we are using. As a result few people have a realistic idea about how they come across to others and this is why 360-degree feedback can be particularly helpful.

A starting point in gaining co-operation - or 'interpersonal management' as EQ calls it – is to learn to become more conscious of one's authentic self; even if we find that it is filled with prejudices and pessimism. For only by becoming aware of what we are thinking and feeling is it possible to adjust our ideas; which in turn impact upon our behaviour.

Behaviour is not fixed in human beings and when we start listening and reacting appropriately to the feedback about our lives (from other people and from our own feelings) can we then channel our personal power (or energy) into making a difference. Increasingly the need for personal fulfilment is being prioritised by an ever more sophisticated workforce. Companies that fail to recognise the significance of the social and emotional factors will struggle in an economy predicted by futurists – (such as South Africa's Graeme Codrington) to emphasise the importance of relationships.

Individuals who do so by constantly developing their level of EQ will experience the future as manageable and rewarding. Those who don't would do well to start hoarding good quality pieces of cardboard now ... for they're going to need them when standing at the traffic lights with their handwritten signs; the ones that say 'God bless You' on them!

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