



Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Jennifer Nabben , (2015), "The art of influence: apply emotional intelligence and create time and space for thinking", Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, Vol. 29 Iss 1 pp. 3 - 6

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/DLO-09-2014-0072>

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The art of influence: apply emotional intelligence and create time and space for thinking

Jennifer Nabben



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The ability for leaders to positively influence others is a critical skill for those who want to retain their company's best talent, remain competitive and unleash the creative energy of employees. Yet many learning and development (L&D) professionals identify "influence" as the number one skill gap in their organizations' leadership teams. For years, companies have recruited their leaders by focusing on IQ and technical skills, yet research shows (Goleman, 1995) that leaders who demonstrate high levels of social intelligence and emotional intelligence (EI) are best placed to build a high-performance culture and deliver higher levels of financial performance.

The business case for including EI as a core competence for leaders has been growing since Goleman's (1995) ground-breaking book *Emotional Intelligence* published in 1995. Since then, there has been a growing body of research and interest in how organizations can harness this "hidden" skill of performance and strategic advantage.

In my own book, I point to the recent financial crash, highlighting just how toxic powerful emotions such as greed and fear were in the decision-making of some of the most powerful financial institutions (Nabben, 2014). It is little surprise then that L&D practitioners are looking to develop leadership programs that put EI at their heart to equip leaders in the skills that make the biggest difference to leading and engaging employees and delivering bottom-line business results.

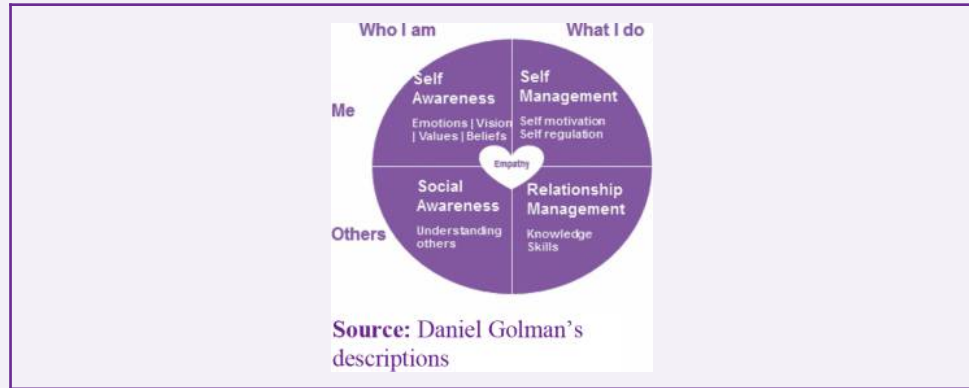
So what are the EI skills leaders need to develop to positively influence employees' performance, motivation and engagement in the organization? (Figure 1). And what does the emerging field of neuroscience tell us about how leaders can use their own emotions to positively influence employees?

Self-awareness

The first area to focus on is for a leader to become fully aware of who they really are; to understand the core values that drive them as leaders; to recognize how their (often hidden) beliefs affect their performance, relationships and leadership style; to recognize their emotional triggers and emotional responses to both work demands and the challenge of working with emotionally and psychologically complex colleagues, team members and stakeholders. Neuroscience shows just how critical it is for leaders to firstly develop emotional awareness and emotional self-regulation.

The neuroscientist Ramachandran (2010) has spent many years studying the role of the brain's mirror neuron system in how we influence others. He proposes that around 75,000 years ago, humans took a major evolutionary step when our brains developed

Figure 1 The four skills of emotional intelligence



Text

EI includes four core components: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and managing our relationships with others. Once we develop insight and a deeper understanding of what drives others, we become more empathetic and more emotionally resilient and we are better able to adapt our own style to influence others.

a more sophisticated mirror neuron system. For the first time, our ancestors could adopt the point of view of another person; they could watch an animal being skinned, or somebody light a fire or create an “internal simulation” of the same action. This new brain circuitry accelerated our ability to learn and share critical skills of survival and safety such as fire and shelter making. But while some of our mirror neurons are designed specifically to mirror other people’s motor skills, we also have mirror neurons that fire when we see somebody else being touched. It is these mirror neurons that scientists believe are the basis of our ability to empathize with others, to experience their pain or pleasure as if it is our own. When we see the look of fear pass across somebody’s face, we can instantly recognize and often “feel” their emotion. In groups, powerful emotions can be communicated and quickly spread across large numbers of people; just think of how quickly emotions can be shared in crowds when watching a sporting event or when gripped by fear. In modern business, scientists have discovered that the dominant organizational emotions are conveyed by the top leaders and cascaded down via the mirror neuron system throughout the organization.

So our ability to tune in to others is not just a cognitive process but is in fact a deeply hardwired brain activity. It’s all about our brain-to-brain connections; how one person’s thinking and emotional state and the words they use can affect another person at the level of their neurology.

Self-management

Leaders are therefore uniquely placed to positively (or negatively) influence those they lead. Leaders who actively manage their own emotions and consciously attend to the psychological environment of the organization are better able to maintain employees’ motivation, commitment and loyalty. When a leader communicates with passion, honesty and emotional coherence, they are able to significantly shift the emotional set point of the group and help to address some of the fears and anxieties that are activated during times of change or uncertainty.

Social awareness

There are five common triggers for employees' negative emotional reactions that can reduce morale, motivation and commitment of employees (Schwartz, 2010):

1. condescension and lack of respect;
2. being treated unfairly;
3. being unappreciated;
4. feeling that you're not being listened to or heard; and
5. being held to unrealistic deadlines.

Emotionally intelligent leaders therefore focus as much on the psychological environment of the organization and work with their leadership team to build a culture where employees feel safe and appreciated and are able to fully participate in solving business problems. So what can leaders do to create an organizational culture where employees feel safe to share not only their concerns and anxieties but also their own unique perspectives, insight and experience in order to find the best possible solutions to organizational challenges?

Kline (1999) has spent the past 30 years working on developing and promoting what she calls a "Thinking Environment" in organizations to help them build more open and collaborative cultures and to encourage independent, creative and intelligent thinking. Kline's Thinking Environment is based on ten components that together, help people to think for themselves with rigor, creativity and grace (Table I).

Typically, this would involve using a series of incisive questions and holding "question rounds" where team members are given equal time to share their best thinking on a topic.

The leader asks the team to agree that there will be no interruptions and that members will pay attention to each person as they speak (by holding eye contact and refraining from using mobiles or laptops, taking notes or looking away from the speaker). The leader's role is to model components such as creating a sense of ease, encouraging appreciation and offering critical information to help the group understand an issue.

During the question rounds, team members begin to build collaborative thinking and to move away from the more "typical" meeting behaviors such as verbal "tailgating" interrupting somebody mid-sentence, being overly critical about somebody's (still not fully formed) idea or even "ignoring" their contribution. In any meeting where these more negative behaviors are accepted as the norm, most members of the team start to experience what's known as a low-level amygdala attack; their brain moves into a fight-flight response that can lead to withdrawing, becoming defensive or feeling the need to be more aggressive to get their own point across. Over time this creates a toxic thinking environment in any team and will tend to move toward "groupthink", where only those who are most dominant are heard and where the other team members withdraw their emotional and cognitive contribution.

Table I Kline's ten components of a thinking environment

Attention	Listening to others with palpable respect and interest, and without interruption
Equality	Giving equal turns and attention
Ease	Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency
Appreciation	Offering genuine acknowledgment of a person's qualities
Encouragement	Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving internal competition
Feelings	Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking
Information	Supplying facts and dismantling denial
Diversity	Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities
Incisive questions	Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves
Place	Creating a physical environment that says back to people "You matter"

An emotionally intelligent leader, rather than assuming that those who speak the loudest have the most valuable contribution will be more likely to understand and value different thinking and personality styles and will take active steps to create an environment where people feel safe to contribute their very best thinking.

Leadership development

Because EI begins with the skill of self-awareness, it is critical to start a leadership development program by using a high-quality psychological diagnostic tool that will give leaders deeper insight into their emotional strengths and areas for development. Assessment tools are useful when organizations want to build EI skills across a broad leadership population. And using a common diagnostic assessment helps leaders and managers build a common understanding, language and toolkit for EI. Coaching is also a critical element of any EI program, so that leaders can work with a coach to agree on an action plan and receive focused feedback and support as they shift behavior and try new approaches to old challenges.

Keywords:
Leadership development,
Emotional intelligence,
Influence

EI training can be delivered as a standalone leadership development program or be integrated into an organization's existing development programs. L&D professionals who want to build a high-performance culture across the whole organization need to ensure that EI and social intelligence training is at the heart of their leadership development.

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About the author

Jennifer Nabben has over 20 years' corporate experience at senior levels in blue-chip companies, including the British Gas, the UN's World Food Programme, Coca Cola, Lloyds, HSBC, Hewlett Packard and Hays plc, working extensively in internal communications, change management and business improvement. Jenny runs her own training and development company and designs corporate programs on impact and influence and creative messaging for international companies. Education: MBA from Henley Management College, BA in English and History from University of London, NLP Master Practitioner, Facilitator and Coach. Jennifer Nabben can be contacted at: jennynabben@mac.com