

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Emotional Intelligence (EI or EQ) continues to receive attention in the field of leadership development and communication with as many as 85% of the world's top 500 organisations allegedly claiming it is an essential leadership skill and the single most important factor in predicting success.

At an evening get-together, Comma's interim network shared thoughts and experiences around introducing EI as a part of their leadership communications strategy.

Despite the high awareness of the importance - if not the value - of EI, evidence of it is still limited in corporate life. One reason for this might be that it is still seen as a 'soft skill' or perhaps an inherent rather than an acquired skill, and lacks a body of hard data and evidence to get it to most top tables.

There is a view that until we can shift the perception of EI as being less about getting along and more about being smart with emotions (as a way of influencing business outcomes) it will remain tough to move the needle. Comma Interims agree it's about finding the right moment which will depend upon the business situation. When there's a burning platform and leaders are looking for 'the thing' to help them connect with their colleagues, that's the opportunity to bring it in.

EI as an engagement technique

Having introduced EI capabilities to several organisations, Lisa Cornell-Norman, Director of Communication, People & Culture for Coca-Cola Partners suggests that, "Working it in through the engagement agenda is a good place to start. Leadership teams are already comfortably familiar with the benefits of enhanced employee engagement and EI, when broken down into component parts, offers a set of capabilities that can be easily understood."

Daniel Goleman's published best seller (1995) "Emotional Intelligence - Why it Can Matter More Than IQ" has done a great deal to popularise the concept and breaks it down into five easily understood capabilities:

Self-awareness – emotions, strengths and weaknesses, impacts

Self regulation – redirecting disruptive emotions and adapt to changing circumstances

Social skills – managing people to move in the right direction

Empathy – considering other people's feelings especially when making decisions

Motivation – driven to achieve and driving others

Communication impact

So, what does this mean for communicators? It certainly raises some big questions: some feel communication roles are now a little blurred and are more entwined with colleagues in HR, PR, Marketing and Engagement. And this means our credibility could be at stake unless our industry embraces communication in its entirety, learning more about the psychology behind it along the way. We can support leadership teams to deliver effective messages, not just by crafting and drafting, but through actions, verbal and non-verbal language and understanding of leadership styles and learning about the science of human interaction.

Virginia Hicks of [Comma Partners](#) said: “The role of a senior internal communicator is much more about influencing and coaching their senior teams to be able to really connect with their colleagues across the business. There’s no doubt in my mind that to be a good practitioner today our own EI must be very high to start with.”

By focussing only on our leaders, aren’t we missing the point? Comma Interims agreed that as communicators they should be going down a more holistic route for organisations. One said: “We spend over 200 days a year at work and we all go through the entire gamut of emotions from hatred, anger, frustration, boredom, excitement and perhaps even something approaching love. Work is an emotional experience and we need everyone to get on board with this sort of training.”

Clearly leadership need to be on board and exhibiting the right communication behaviours for an organisation to reach its full potential. Having the ability to understand and influence how and why people at work are feeling the way they do, amidst the changing and highly fluid state of the modern corporate world, is vital for business leaders if they are to successfully steer their organisation through periods of substantial change.

EI and change

Cornell-Norman goes a step further: “Change programmes are doomed to fail unless emotional transition is achieved and this does involve everyone in the organisation. It demands time and commitment from leaders and a new kind of business conversation within a climate of trust.”

One interim said: “In my experience, and especially during periods of intense change, leaders with high EI are not just visible; they are vocal. They invite conversations about purpose and vision in authentic and informal ways. Gone are the days where they rely on their communication team to provide a script.”

We know the greatest challenges in the workplace are seldom technical; they tend to be interpersonal. Much evidence exists that tells us quite clearly what people most want from their working relationships: to be valued; to have clear and consistent expectations of the relationship; to be really heard – not just listened to and to be supported in their desire to grow.

Good news

It doesn't take much to realise that a manager or leader who doesn't feel a responsibility toward others, can't handle stress, is unaware of their own emotions, does not see nor understand their impact on others, lacks the ability to understand others or erupts into anger easily is likely to derail their own career and damage the organisation around them.

The good news is that the emotional intelligence capabilities required for high performing managers and leaders can be learnt and nurtured – and that's an area we should be influencing as professional communicators.

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