

SOURCE LINES

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: COLLABORATION IN THE WORKPLACE

The current issue of this series on emotional intelligence in the workplace examines those factors that best promote collaborative work. *Collaboration* is presented as an indispensable practice for business organizations, and is founded on emotional intelligence competencies at both the individual and corporate level. As in previous issues the work of Daniel Goleman, Ph.D. provides the backbone for this article.

As you recall, the business case for **collaboration** in the workplace was introduced in the most recent newsletter. What we now clearly know is that in today's workplace each of us has an increasingly smaller part of the information or expertise needed to get the job done. In the twentieth century more knowledge has been generated than in all the other centuries put together. Therefore, while in 1986 people could work at their job with 75% of the required knowledge in their heads, this had dropped to between 15 and 20% by 1997. Because of this fact, organizations have come to depend on the group mind as never before. Collaborative practice is no longer a choice but a requirement in an ever competitive global market.

Many research studies have compared individual and collaborative performance. In summary, these studies have consistently shown the following:

- when a task is undertaken by a group where collaboration is burdened with personalized conflict and friction the performance of that group is

poorer than if the same work was done as individuals rather than a team

- when the group works reasonably well it will outperform individual performance
- most importantly, however, when the group has real synergy, it will by far exceed the best individual performance. Synergy is best thought of as members of the same team feeding off one another in positive ways; as result the “whole” becomes better than “the sum of the parts”. Collaboration can actually raise the “group IQ” - i.e. the sum total of the best talents of each member on the team.

Outstanding collaboration is not haphazardly achieved, but is carefully constructed. This point is strongly emphasized by Michael Schrage in his book No More Teams: Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration. Emotional intelligence competencies in individual team members have been shown to have central importance to achieve collaborative excellence. When these are present they promote those team characteristics that enable outstanding work. High achieving teams have the following in common:

- interpersonal skills and compatibility
- at least one person with high IQ is essential but not sufficient
- shared motivation
- ability to resolve differences and communicate effectively

All in all, it is the social effectiveness of the group that predicts how well a team will do, more than

the individual IQs of its members. Teams that are most effective have members who are able to consistently demonstrate social competencies such as:

- Empathy, or interpersonal understanding
- Cooperation and a unified effort
- Open, honest communication, setting explicit norms and expectations, and confronting under-achieving team members
- Drive to improve, so that the team pays attention to performance feedback
- Self awareness, in the form of evaluating their strengths and weaknesses as a team
- Initiative and taking a proactive stance towards solving problems
- Flexibility in how they go about collective tasks
- Building bonds to other teams.

To these, Schrage adds the following:

- Competence - “a collection of incompetents, no matter how diligent, or well meaning, cannot be successful”
- Shared, understood goal - collaboration is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. When it is going exceptionally well people are energized by it; when it is extremely poor, people are talking about it rather than working towards it
- Mutual respect, tolerance, trust- as it is with competence, there must be a minimum threshold of these qualities; beyond promoting good team functioning they also serve as the fabric of creating a respectful workplace. These are qualities that are represented in the kind of language one uses in the work setting, in the attitudes that one holds towards co-workers of different personal or professional backgrounds, and in the way that one sees differences as a strength rather than a threat.

So far we have described collaboration as being dependent on competencies that reside in individuals and are applied in interpersonal relationships. However, for these skills to thrive they also require an organizational culture that values collaboration and promotes positive reinforcing of it.

But who has time to grow orchids?

“Outstanding collaboration is not haphazardly achieved, but is carefully constructed.”

In the previous newsletter we made reference to promoting collaboration as being akin to growing orchids. Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden in their book Contented Cows Give Better Milk: The Plain Truth About Employee Relations And Your Bottom Line argue for making it a priority. Enlightened employee relations that encourage collaborative work have nothing whatsoever to do with social or humanitarian interests, nor superficial platitudes. They involve commitment of resources and time, which are more than recovered in the budget bottom line. According to Catlette and Hagan, , best practices are those that provide employees the following opportunities:

- Meaningful Work- “Employees need to feel proud of their work. They want suitable challenges, and the freedom to pursue them. They want to be in the game, not on the bench.”
- High Standards- “They dislike losing organizations and don’t want to hang around with losers.”
- Balanced Worth-its- “A commensurate level of interest and investment in them must be demonstrated, with internal systems which support rather than impede their efforts. Freedom to pursue some things that are important to them.”
- A Level Playing Field- “Means reciprocal caring, coupled with some sense of justice and an assurance they won’t be taken advantage of.”
- To Be And Feel Competent- A sense of personal competence is best achieved when one is given the necessary tools to do a task, together with ongoing, constructively delivered feedback, and the opportunity for input.

Building better mousetraps produces smarter mice

Human beings are uniquely capable of regulating their own involvement and commitment to a given task, or endeavour. The extent to which employees fully contribute or withhold is governed more by attitude than by necessity, fear, or economic influence. Put another way, those organizations which have approached employee relations in the same manner as building better mousetraps have only succeeded in creating smarter mice.

Simply stated:

Employee's personal capability minus Minimum Requirements equals Discretionary Effort

If we follow the evidence, an employee's discretionary effort is most easily maximized through good employee relations that also encourage a collaborative culture. When this practice is achieved the work setting thrives by:

- balancing a focus on tasks with attention to relationships
- sharing of plans, information, and resources
- promoting a friendly, cooperative climate

Goleman reminds us that to transform your workplace into an enduring collaborative setting, you need emotional intelligence at the individual, but also collective and organizational levels. The same competencies will permanently graft the practices to the values that guide the organization.

Whenever there is a strong team, with clarity about its mission, high standards for its product, and sense of how to do its work, you don't just see fears and uncertainty the way you do in other organizations. Members are then able to put their trust in their teammates, the organization and its leaders.

In the next newsletter we will turn our attention on how to acquire the emotional competencies presented, individually and organizationally.

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Random Thoughts

**“It's impossible to learn what you think you already know.” Unknown
&
“Indecision may or may not be my problem.” Jimmy Buffett**

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