Innovation and Creativity: The EI Factor

by Rocky Wallace

The world of work is in a time of transition as organizations wrestle with how to maximize the human potential that ultimately makes or breaks a company. In our age of knowledge capital, organizations often still make industrial age mistakes, over-demanding and under-appreciating the people down in the trenches. A new generation of organizational leadership researchers and authors are shedding light on a variable that may prove to be the x-factor in how people and relationships are weighted into the equation for holistic organizational effectiveness. The increased appreciation for emotional intelligence (EI), that hard-to-measure quality that determines so much of how well a person navigates life's journey, is transforming organizations and the people who make them work.

The Human Factor

Consider the typical scenario. Harry has been driving his staff hard for six months, determined to out-produce the other departments in the company. Despite warnings of burnout by several of his team members, he is relentless as the end of the spring quarter draws near. He forgets birthdays and special occasions and points out mistakes more often than usual. In team meetings, he is distant, cold and negative. He seems to no longer be the boss that everyone likes. He cares only about work output and data. He throws a party for his division when the numbers show a record third quarter profit and is disappointed when only half of his employees show up for the after-work celebration. He is shocked when on Monday morning two of his veterans turn in their resignations, having been hired away by a competitor across town.

Pfeffer (1998) calls Harry's "winning but losing" predicament "the human equation." He says that people-centered management will only lead to organizational success if people are truly put first and valued as more than pawns that generate profits. The workplace culture is often driven by bottom line results to the point of leaving the impression that good relationship skills are not needed at

work. Harry was not managing himself very well. He was also not effectively motivating his staff nor building authentic relationships with them. This resulted in a meltdown.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence was ushered into the mainstream of social science discussions when Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee introduced *Primal Leadership* in 2002. The authors defined four domains as the variables that determine emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. Formerly relegated to minor and unchangeable personality traits, research is revealing that EI is a huge determinant of an individual's success. How a person masters personal and social competence is a key driver in everything else that unfolds in the day-to-day mural that eventually makes up our lives.

Bradberry and Greaves (2003), in testing more than 500,000 people to explore the role emotions play in daily living, found that we have a global epidemic of people who do not understand and manage their emotions well. Surprisingly, they discovered that those in top-level management positions scored lower on EI assessments than those lower on the hierarchical ladder. Yet, ninety percent of top performers scored high in emotional intelligence, thus directly linking creativity and innovation to EI. Their research also link EI to health and happiness. Cancer risks increase when emotions are in distress, while emotional intelligence skills help speed the body's healing from disease by keeping the immune system strong.

EI is much more than having a pleasant personality or good people skills, although that all forms part of it. In reality, EI affects every part of our lives: our relationships with our spouse, children, parents, other relatives, friends, church family, work colleagues and those with whom we do business. How effective we are in these diverse relationships depends heavily on our internal EI: how we manage our self, our thoughts, first reactions, what we say to others, how we say it, what we spend our emotional energy on and our coping skills.

The Leader, Self-Deception and Serving

The Arbinger Institute (2000) defines the blind spot many CEOs and supervisors have as self-deception and urges leaders to take an honest look in the mirror and have the courage to see what

their followers see. McIntosh and Rima (1997) call the dark side of leadership "personal dysfunction" and caution that it leads to ruined careers and tarnished reputations.

In contrast, Blanchard, Zigarmi and Zigarmi (1985) define the "others focused" leader as a servant leader who develops EI skills that empower and equip followers. Blanchard's situational leadership quadrant model of directing, coaching, supporting and delegating, embraces the concept of ongoing growth for all members of the organization. Maxwell (2005) adds to this model of servant leadership by urging leaders to lead up, across and down, thus creating a climate of relationship building and support on every level of the organization. Stephen Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), introduces the concept of self leadership, a key ingredient in emotional intelligence development.

Toxic Culture

Without all members of the organization working on personal and team emotional intelligence development, a cancerous culture can permeate the organization. This will limit creativity, innovation, growth and day-to-day harmony. Lencioni (2002) identifies a condition he calls artificial harmony (acceptance of dysfunction in order to get along) and warns that it can threaten the health of any team. Consider these scenarios:

- A CEO fails to maintain a trusting and equipping relationship with his leadership team, feeling threatened by the suggestions of team members and thus squelching the synergy that is needed for the team to be effective.

- A senior vice president does not relate well to subordinates and is perceived as someone who would be a tyrannical leader. His intellectual skills have him in line for promotion to CEO, but his reputation may hinder future advancement in his career.

- A division team foregoes the company's teamwork training, feeling that the annual professional development is largely a waste of time. The team stops meeting regularly as various members can't get along in brainstorming sessions. The arguing creates too much tension for the rest of the group.

- An administrative assistant is given a poor evaluation after repeatedly criticizing other colleagues in lunchroom discussions.

- Two clerical workers are demoted after arguing over office supplies in front of clients in the reception area.

- A phone operator is fired for repeatedly insulting customers who called in with complaints or questions regarding company policy.

- A college intern is not given a recommendation letter after a summer of arriving late for work and often swearing or making sarcastic comments to other employees.

- A firm's most valued account is not renewed due to company reps being too busy to meet over lunch during an annual conference.

- An executive board puts an entire leadership team on probation after repeated complaints throughout the organization that employee ideas and suggestions were not being considered.

- An organization is sued by a group of spouses who provide proof that their mates were verbally abused in meetings, not paid for documented overtime and given less than favorable evaluations for daring to question company decisions that were jeopardizing relationships with clients and other partners.

A Better Way: Seven Steps to Increasing EI, Creativity and Innovation

The above examples may seem extreme, but they take place every day in organizations all over the world. Most or all of these typical scenarios could be avoided by paying attention to the emotional intelligence factor. Included here are seven steps that can assist an organization in overcoming EI retardation, unleashing the human capital potential of employees throughout the company.

Step 1: Conduct ongoing staff-wide emotional intelligence training

Employees are fascinated with the intangible factors of their work. Too often, we limit our staff training and discussions to data and numbers. Helping staff on all levels to better

understand personality traits, tendencies, individual and group strengths, blind spots and the dynamics of relationships can transform the organizational culture.

Step 2: Celebrate birthdays, other special events and accomplishments

Embrace the creed: "Our people are our company." Adopt a human resources philosophy that encourages social times and celebrations. Ask what would be seen as a gesture of kindness from the employee's perspective.

Step 3: Appreciate uniqueness

Truly great organizations seem to understand this principle of "one plus one doesn't equal two." Tear the walls of hierarchy and positional power down and turn all employees lose to invent and share their insights about what will make the company great. Embrace the reality that the executive team does not know all the answers and would be in a pitiful mess if the "worker bees" were not around.

Step 4: Establish a culture of ongoing mentoring, coaching and supporting

What would happen in an organization if every employee, from the CEO to the custodian, had a mentor? What would happen if every employee freely discussed, modified and added to his or her growth plan every quarter (without fear of criticism or belittling reprimand)? The increase in effectiveness and workplace satisfaction would be huge.

Step 5: Focus on customer service

We are in business because of our customers. When every employee embraces the concept that the reason he or she works for the company, is because of the customers it serves, then organizational culture has crossed a critical threshold.

Step 6: Stress advanced communication skills

Advanced communication skills are about having authentic conversations. The danger of professional relationships being minimized to e-mails and voice messages is a growing concern for many organizations. We need to encourage and train employees to work hard on "face time" and help them to not minimize the human factor. A great organization will understand that serving customers effectively is about relationships.

Step 7: Live integrity and core values

We need to hold ourselves accountable to do the right things at the right times and for the right reasons. This "goodness" factor cannot be emphasized enough. People are drawn to others who they believe in, trust and admire. This is true in business partnerships, in the church, in education, in the stores where people choose to shop and even where people spend their leisure time.

Blessing Self and Others

Covey (2004) explains that finding one's voice and then being committed to helping others find their voice is one of the key secrets to living a fulfilling life. Such self-management is essential if individuals, teams and organizations are to grow in the area of emotional intelligence. When an entire organization is working on developing emotional intelligence, the creativity and innovation factor will have limitless potential.

Once personal competence and social competence are achieved, the contribution to the larger mission goes to a higher level. Synergy takes place and knowledge is unleashed. The human factor drives the company. Effectiveness, authenticity and results on all levels become the daily culture. Bakke (2005) calls this magical balance "joy at work" and challenges companies to trust their people and re-invent a workplace that emphasizes respect and trust.

Harry, who we profiled earlier, can change. Emotional intelligence can be learned and developed. What would have happened if Harry had spent less time looking at numbers and more time investing in his people? What if he had chatted with each employee daily and took the time to learn about their families and other interests? What if he had started each meeting with a relaxed persona and nodded with friendly approval as he listened to the ideas of others? What if he had taken his team out to lunch after a difficult project had been completed and then gave them the afternoon off? What if he had started letting go of his pressure, delegated some decisions to his team and went home earlier to his family more often? Most likely, almost overnight, his division's creativity, innovation and production would have soared. Such is the power of emotional intelligence. Such is the x-factor that separates the organizations that value their employees as their most valuable resource, from those that treat their people as they do their computers: tools that produce profit.

About the author

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