

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE - UPDATE

In the last instalment of our ISS for 2012, we provide a synopsis of recent developments regarding emotional intelligence (EI) at work. Specifically, we summarise some of the most recent findings on research on EI, and we outline how EI may be used for both positive and negative purposes within organisations.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions in the self and in others. There are two predominant models of EI; the mixed model (aka the popularised trait-based Goleman model) and the ability-based model (aka Mayer, Caruso and Saolvey's work).

The predominant focus of EI research has been on how EI can facilitate pro-social outcomes (e.g., transformational leadership behaviours, as well as psychological and physical well-being) and organisational benefits (e.g., success in jobs with high emotional labour demands, group citizenship behaviours, work performance, effective decision-making and negotiation, team performance, and leadership effectiveness).

Research findings offer evidence that EI contributes to these outcomes *above and beyond* the contributions of other factors, such as traditional IQ and personality traits such as conscientiousness. This suggests that being high EI is good for both individuals and their organisations. However, as outlined overleaf, the counterintuitive idea that EI may in fact have two faces – a 'light side' and a 'dark side' is starting to gain traction.

Recent Research

The Gold Coast recently played host to the specialist annual event called the Asia-Pacific Emotions in Work-life Symposium. Some of the most innovative research findings on EI presented at this event, which had an Emotional Intelligence theme, are as follows:

EI Intervention Programs – Do they work?: In line with the notion that EI is an ability / set of skills, and can therefore be developed via training programs and so forth, EI expert Dr. Nicola Schutte provided a review of research on the effectiveness of EI intervention programs. About half these studies used the trait model, and the other half the ability model, with the results showing that EI training programs can increase EI. Most of the training programs used a cognitive behavioural approach – they combined the presentation of information about EI with the opportunity to practice emotional skills through role-plays and so forth.

EI and Bullying: Understanding the role of emotions in bullying behaviour is crucial to designing intervention programs, such as emotional skills training, which might be useful in reducing bullying in the workplace. A study that explored the link between emotional skills and workplace bullying found that individuals high in emotional skills perceived less bullying behaviour than their low emotional skill counterparts did. Further, those high in emotional skills that either witnessed or experienced bullying behaviour had less negative reactions than their lower emotional skill counterparts. The ability to manage one's own and others'

emotions, which are two of the core EI abilities, played an important role in this relationship, with training programs that develop these skills potentially being one way to reduce bullying.

EI, Cyber-Ostracism and Stress: A very unique study looked at the role of EI in virtual team settings where a person is put into a stressful situation (one that involves having to solve complex problems –high task difficulty – as part of a virtual team) and is then ostracised (left out of their team, isolated). Salivary cortisol samples (a stress hormone) were gathered pre and post experiment to see if EI played a role in reducing the effects of these two stressors. The results showed whilst task difficulty and being ostracised both increased cortisol levels, being high in EI had a buffering effect. This finding suggests that programs that help develop EI abilities should help reduce some of the negative outcomes that stressors such as high task difficulty and ostracism can cause.

Emotional Intelligence – Friend or Foe in Organisational Settings?

More recently, questions have been raised as to whether being high in EI is a good, or a bad thing in organisational settings. Research on the way EI is used has almost exclusively portrayed EI in a positive light and neglected the possibility that it may also have “dark side”. The rationale behind this provocative argument lies in the proposition that high-EI individuals may use their abilities in a manipulative manner in order to achieve personal goals, even at the expense of others. These personal goals may or may not align with the goals of the organisation, potentially adding another layer of problems to the mix.

For example, preliminary evidence is emerging that perpetrators of abusive supervision, mistreatment and bullying at work may use their EI strategically to pursue personal goals such as fulfilling a need to feel powerful or dominant, e.g., by humiliating subordinates. They also use EI to suppress / regulate negative emotions, as well as to engage in positive emotional displays, in front of important others. This helps them avoid detection of, and subsequent punishment for, their abusive behaviour. Arguably, in cases of abusive supervision, the perpetrators personal goals do not align with the organisations goals, and their fulfilment occurs at the expense of their victims, who suffer negative effects such as distress.

Studies are now starting to explore the dark side of EI, including the relationship between psychopathy, antisocial behaviour, narcissism, and other toxic management behaviours.

Making the Most of EI

In summary, it is important that we confront the possibility that employing highly emotionally intelligent individuals may not always yield desirable outcomes in organisations. Having said this, the evidence that EI can lead to range of positive outcomes should not be pushed aside prematurely. At this stage, the jury is still out on the light side and dark side of EI debate. In the meantime, it is critical that human resource managers and organisational development managers alike keep abreast of the most recent developments in EI. This includes relevant findings on its dark side, so that organisations can maximise how it can be used for beneficial outcomes at work, whilst minimising the potential for its dark side to lead to destructive outcomes.