

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?
OR
IS EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
RELEVANT IN THE WORKPLACE?

I have always disliked fads and fashionable trends as they seem to bring out the salmon in me. That is, they create in me a desire to swim fast and hard in the opposite direction to the other fish. In the face of fads in general are you a salmon? Or do you swim with the crowd? If you are a salmon, you may find that it causes something of a dilemma if the recent fad is one in which you are interested or might even believe. So I guess that is what I need to say first. I know that the whole subject of emotional intelligence is the "in thing" and that for those of you who are salmon the very title of this article will have started you thinking or feeling that this has nothing to do with you. I know that in every professional journal you read emotional intelligence raises its head, encouraging you to read about it, learn about it, go on a course about it, get a coach who will teach you about it, generally encouraging you to join the rest of the fish and swim in the same direction as them. I understand that for many of you this will therefore make the whole subject less credible. It might bring out the salmon in you, encouraging you to go the other way, to ignore it until the next fashionable management fad comes along, then you will be safe and relieved that you didn't waste your time, your money or your energy on this one.

So, the second thing I need to do is take you back to Aristotle. You see emotional intelligence and its importance in life and work is not a recent fad, its foundation goes all the way back to about 350 BC and to the work of Aristotle. Aristotle thought a great deal about the impact our emotions have on the way in which we think and behave. He, and philosophers after him such as Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Kant etc sought to understand the interaction between our souls and our minds, our emotions and our thoughts and behaviours (Forgas, 2001). Aristotle argued that we create problems if we regulate our emotions either too much or too little, so learning how to regulate them, which he saw as a combination of using



both our reason and our emotions, is vital to successful living.

So what is the current interest in emotional intelligence saying? Well, much the same as the philosophers and therapists, such as Freud, said in the past. **Emotional intelligence is not about emotionality. It is not about just letting it all hang out and saying what you are feeling at any given moment. It is about using our emotions and the emotions of others in a constructive way.** It is about "Knowing how to separate healthy and unhealthy feelings and how to turn negative feelings into positive ones" (Hein, S. 2002) This is a simple definition which encompasses many parts. Having emotional intelligence includes being aware of your own feelings, being able to monitor and understand them and being able to express them in a way which is constructive both for yourself and for those around you. It includes being aware of the emotional impact you might be having on another person and of the impact their emotions and behaviours are having on you and being able to include these in your constructive response to the situation in which you find yourself. It is about being able to combine both your reason and your emotions and to use them together in forming good and constructive relationships both with yourself and with other people.

Why is any of this important in the workplace? **It is important because we are all emotional beings and we act and react emotionally in every area of our lives, including work.** It is important because an organisation which values and promotes emotional intelligence is likely

to be a place which understands and uses this, so that it has a high level of trust and commitment, where tension is seen as creative and positive and where people develop more satisfying and productive relationships, relationships which in turn encourage the development of further emotional intelligence skills and result in more effective decisions.

Is this really true? Well test it out for yourself. Recall any family or social event when someone was in a bad mood and you will remember how contagious and powerful the impact of one person's emotions on a group can be. Remember that *"Emotions are contagious, and a single person can influence the emotional tone of the group."* (Cherniss, 2001). See if you can remember a time when someone seemed to be able to break down the tensions everyone could feel, changing the mood and behaviours of the group. You will most likely find that this happened because the emotional states of all concerned were considered and acknowledged in some way and that this brought about a change. Now, think about any situation you are dealing with at the moment at home or at work. Think about the other people involved in this situation. Are any of them being difficult? How are they behaving? Do they have a different view to yours? Are they describing the situation differently to you? Are they listening to what you are saying about the situation? Are their motives different to yours? How do your motives and theirs impact on the situation? What are you *not* understanding about each other's position? The answers to at least some of these questions are likely to bring emotions into play, either yours or theirs. Consider how things might change if the other people acknowledged and respected your thoughts and feelings in the situation regardless of the outcome. Then consider how the situation might change if the other people knew that you really understood their feelings and point of view.

Still not convinced? Then maybe you need to be aware of some of the research in this area. Of course I am aware that I only have space for a small sample and I

understand that in order for you to really trust this data you might need to read the originating literature thoroughly for yourself, but I hope these snippets will at least give you an idea of the impact emotional intelligence might have in an organisation.

- *"A Gallup Organization study of two million employees at seven hundred different companies found that how long an employee stays at a company and how productive she is there is determined by her relationship with her immediate supervisor."* (Zipkin, 2000)
- Barsade (2000) of the Yale School of Management found that the spread of positive emotions within teams encourages cooperation, reduces conflict and increases a work team's effectiveness.
- *"Individuals with higher than average emotional intelligence display strong self-awareness and high levels of interpersonal skill. They are empathetic, adaptable, able to cope with pressure and generally experience less stress and better health and well being than low scorers."*(Bardzil & Slaski, 2003).
- Boland and Tenkasi (1995) found that successful problem solving required participants to be aware of and able to coordinate their different perspectives.
- Bunker (1997) is one of many whose work found that leaders who are successful in managing organisations and organisational change effectively, are people who are aware of and know how to manage their own feelings and know how to listen to and work with the feelings of others.

So, assuming I have now convinced the salmon in you to at least stay still, treading water for a while, I would like to pose the question: how is organizational emotional intelligence developed? First, decide where the most effective starting point might be. **Cary Cherniss, Chairman of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, suggests that working with the leader or leaders in the organisation is the first step.** Remember they are likely to have most impact on the atmosphere and culture of the organisation. Secondly, he suggests

working with the whole senior management team to see if they are managing as a group with emotional intelligence. Strengthening their abilities is a way of influencing and strengthening the emotional tone of the organisation. Thirdly, he suggests working with the front line workers in an organisation, for they are the ones who actually produce the work. He suggests leaving the middle tiers until last, partly because they are more likely to be influenced by those above and below them, so working with those tiers first is the most effective way forward.

Having identified the individuals who might most benefit, the next step is about enabling these individuals to become aware of and understand their own levels of emotional intelligence, to understand the range of emotional competencies, to identify their strengths and weaknesses in emotional competence and to encourage them to fill the gaps. This can be done by following a development programme, of which there are many, mostly based on the one suggested by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) and working either on an individual basis through coaching, or on a group basis through workshops.

However, before swimming ahead with what to do next, it is worth stopping to consider whether you are now a fish or if you are still a salmon. Either way I hope this article has helped to stimulate your thoughts and feelings about emotional intelligence and its relevance in the workplace and if you would like to discuss it further, then get in touch with me at The Baobab Centre by emailing me at gadrury@baobabcentre.com or keep an eye on our website for information on our forthcoming workshop on emotional intelligence. Both salmon and all other fish are welcome.

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