

# Emotional Intelligence: Soft Skills vs Impact Skills

The label 'soft skills' suggests that these skills are not as important as 'hard skills', that they are weaker somehow. But developing self awareness and emotional intelligence is extremely hard...

## The Changing Focus of Emotional Intelligence

Leadership cannot any longer be concerned only with developing strategy and process alone; in other words hard skills. There needs to be a human component which whilst often being seen as the 'soft' dimension is rarely 'soft' in its consequent impact.

The focus has shifted away from the process thinking of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has moved inexorably towards the much more complex and difficult areas of emotional intelligence, self awareness and trust. Why more difficult? None of these areas is difficult to understand in the intellectual arena however all of them are hard to achieve. The root cause of this difficulty requires consideration.

We must first look at why we do not all behave in the most appropriate and effective way in every situation, because clearly we don't. Intellectually we know how to behave, we know how to get the best from people, and we know intellectually what makes for great leadership. The difficulty comes when we try and demonstrate all of the things we know intellectually. Our unconscious will often take over and we start to behave in ways that are not born from conscious intellectual decision making but from unconscious emotions.



In practice what this means is that whilst we have a will to do the right thing we find ourselves behaving towards others in ways that can be counter productive. An example might be a leader who can describe what authentic, empowering leadership means in an articulate and considered way. That same leader when under pressure from a poor economy, sudden attack from competition or other negative change will revert to an unconscious command and control style or become aggressive in giving instructions and demanding action.

'It's easy when it's easy' of course means by default that it's tough when it's tough. So what is it that generates this change from good intent to poor performance? Here we come across a human driver that if allowed to operate in our unconscious realm will cause leaders to behave in ways that they know to be inappropriate - fear. It is easy to demotivate people at the best of times but in the worst of times they are already prepared to be demoralized, you are pushing at an open door.

Emotional intelligence is fundamentally predicated on being able to consciously monitor your emotions at any given time and under any provocation. This conscious monitoring then leads to conscious choice concerning the way that you process those emotions and how they emerge.

## The New Thinking: Impact Skills

'Soft skills' is the old description of the approach and behaviours associated with leading and managing people. A more appropriate label for this area of work might be 'impact skills' because after all they not only have an impact on the people immediately affected but in turn on the success of the business. Often seen as difficult to define 'leadership skills' are nuanced as being something that leaders are born with not learned, a mysterious dark art that is too intangible to be able to develop. However the ability to relate effectively with others and to understand our own motivations and emotions lies with all of us it's just that we are not educated in it.

School systems do not develop these impact skills nor do most colleges and universities (although there is a tentative move towards this field in the emergence of 'Wellbeing Classes' in schools in the UK for example). We are prepared with technical skills for our life in the world of work but do not develop the emotional understanding and self

awareness to use those technical skills effectively. Impact Skills provide the possibility of great relationships, independent workers and the foundations of trust.

### **What is an Adult, Independent and Successful Workforce?**

In order for a workforce to become independent and emotionally intelligent there needs to be a set of important fundamentals in place:

**Firstly** that leaders understand their own emotional or internal world and recognise the emotions that if unchecked will spill out into the world and 'infect' others. For example a manager who is feeling fearful about their performance will unconsciously transmit that fear to staff or team members. A human being when confronted with fear in others responds in the way that all animals respond, fearfully. Fearful staff quickly lose self value and become dependent.

**The second** pre-requisite is that there is a language used everyday that allows everyone to understand the emotions that are in play and helps them put them aside in order to make great decisions. For example a leader that can say 'I can feel that there is a level of anxiety about this and I feel it myself.

Let's not let that get in the way of our decisions here.'. Having this sort of language available can reduce unconscious emotions that if left hidden can impact on great decisions being made.

**Thirdly** that leaders understand their primary role is to create a culture of openness where individual team members are encouraged and supported to make choices about their emotional responses, behaviours and how they interact with others. For example a culture where team members are encouraged and supported in being honest and open about performance issues between themselves.

**Fourthly** that it is the job of leadership to enable their team members to become truly independent rather than dependent. For example leaders that help individuals to make their own decisions, to nurture and develop that person's good judgement.

The aim of leadership that their team members exhibit good judgement is vital because it creates a sense that the individuals are trusted. That in turn develops self confidence.

**So the final prerequisite is trust.** It is said that a leader's trust must be earned by team members. Whilst this is completely true the transaction is not one sided. It is not just down to the individual to earn their leader's trust. It is the responsibility of the leader to create the conditions wherein the individual can trust their leader first. For example if a leader trusts themselves to be able to give direct, honest feedback in a straightforward way without ambiguity or negative emotion then the individual receiving it will begin to trust that such feedback need not be a source of concern but part of their development. However this does require that the leader is fully cognisant of their own motivation and has dealt with any emotional 'baggage' that they may have around the subject of the feedback. For example a leader that needs to give feedback about poor performance needs first to remove from themselves any anger or frustration that they may hold over the situation. This will remove the need for them to be 'judgemental'. In turn this will enable the individual to hear the feedback positively. If the individual feels or senses any anger in their leader then this will serve to increase their fear. Feeling that fear will in turn undermine their trust in their leader who will be deemed to be emotionally untrustworthy.

This is not to say that a leader must be emotionless quite the contrary. Leadership emotion is best experienced at the positive end of the emotional spectrum where it can be motivating so long as it is real and proportional. Negative or fear based emotions (such as anger) are destructive to leadership relationships. The reason? All animals have an instinctive response to danger (the unknown is danger too, which is why change generates such a negative emotional response in some people). That instinct is to move away from danger. When we sense fear it causes us to withdraw mentally, the ensuing fallout is usually resentment.

Emotional intelligence and self awareness are therefore central to great leadership because it is this understanding of self and our impact on others that allows us the freedom to choose how we respond, interact and impact. Without that choice our unconscious can inflict damage on those around us creating the opposite of trust.

If you trust your leader then you are happy and willing to follow and much more likely to deliver discretionary effort. If you don't trust your leader you are more likely to be keeping your CV up to date

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