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Developing leadership capability is today's hot topic. With HR practitioners being constantly bombarded with new theories and approaches, the challenge lies in identifying those theories that actually build leadership edge and capability. While the competency-based approach to leadership development is popular, it appears to miss the subtle but essential ingredient of emotional intelligence or EQ.

EQ in this context is the capacity to deal effectively with everyday leadership demands and pressures, particularly those involving people. It includes qualities that help people flourish and perform well in the workplace such as self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, empathy and social deftness. Leaders with high EQ are sensitive to the needs of others and highly supportive of their staff. In fact, EQ may provide a better measure of vocational success than the traditional measures of behavioural competencies or cognitive intelligence. It is a piece of the leadership capability jigsaw and should not be neglected.

An organisation with high EQ leadership flourishes in the key capability areas of coaching, managing diversity and teamwork. The ability to coach effectively is a key leadership competency, but being an effective coach is not simply a matter of robotically following a set of behavioural protocols. The EQ approach is fundamentally about considering others. Those who demonstrate this personal style tend to have employees with higher job performance, enhanced job satisfaction and stronger loyalty to their organisation. Dominant, aggressive leadership styles are simply ineffective at engaging people and unlocking their full potential.

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Ongoing changes in society's cultural composition mean that companies and their staff need to appreciate people from diverse cultures and markets, and also turn that appreciation into a competitive advantage. Leaders with high EQ typically have the interpersonal savvy to speak up effectively against bias and discrimination.

The EQ approach also builds teamwork capability. And the need for leaders to be part of a team where they genuinely work with their peers towards shared organisational objectives is becoming more pressing. Whenever people come together to collaborate, whether in an executive business strategy meeting or as a team working to solve a customer service issue, there is a strong reliance on people sharing their talents and working effectively together. A critical predictor of team success is the extent to which team members

are able to create a state of internal harmony and maximise the full talents of the group. Teams plagued by politics, friction, rivalries or resentment are much less likely to meet their objectives because people simply cannot be at their best. An EQ culture leads to harmony and high performance.

An organisation can increase the EQ in their leadership ranks by following three broad strategies in recruitment, leadership development and performance assessment, including 360 degree feedback. The first of these concerns the acquisition of leadership talent by an organisation and the promotion of talent within an organisation. While some companies give only cursory attention to assessing leadership capability and potential when hiring and promoting, others invest significant sums of money in assessment processes that vary in their quality and degree of complexity.

The information is valuable but there is often an undue emphasis on cognitive reasoning or ability tests at the cost of EQ issues. Organisations need to recalibrate the weighting given to different clusters of information and recognise the primary role played by EQ in predicting leadership success.

Organisations that do not explore potential EQ issues when hiring or promoting are treading on thin ice. They are more likely to experience problems with their leadership talent pool further down the track. Secondly, competency-based leadership development programmes would include a professional assessment of EQ and be reinforced with coaching. This ensures that problems related to EQ have a forum in which they can be addressed. As well, coaching can be used to explore problem areas that are notoriously neglected in conventional leadership development initiatives. Personal coaches often have a holistic approach: they can adopt a broader and deeper perspective in helping leaders to work on issues that may be only partly work-related, but are nevertheless key to being a successful leader.

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Thirdly, the performance management and development system needs to deal with problem leadership behaviours that are related to preferred leadership styles. To do this requires absolute support from senior leaders in an organisation, including the CEO. Supplementary assessment from staff in the organisation – including 360 degree feedback – is particularly helpful here. The information can be fed directly into the performance management and development process.

Integrating EQ with a competency-based approach is a highly effective way of ensuring your organisation has outstanding leadership talent. As George Washington once said “Let your heart feel for the afflictions and distresses of everyone.”