

PULLING PUNCHES

Mark McCutcheon
CompAssess Business Psychologists
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Developing leadership capability is one of the hottest topics around so much so that human resource practitioners are almost constantly bombarded with new theories and approaches that claim to give organisations the leadership edge. The problem is though, that many of these are really just well marketed “pop-psychology” and do little to build leadership capability, despite the significant levels of investment and time that are often involved.

Popular in Australia for a while has been the competency-based approach to leadership development. Basically, this involves defining in competency terms what effective leaders actually do. Various HR systems such as selection, development and performance management then use these competencies as the foundations to ensure that the desired behaviours are demonstrated on-the-job.

When used for leadership development, the training or development programs are preceded by some form of competency assessment aimed at identifying the gap between actual and the desired leadership capability. Focusing development initiatives on the capability gaps ensures that specific problem areas are addressed directly.

This approach assumes that leaders firstly have to understand what is required of them in their role and secondly make the necessary changes to their behaviour. Easy, isn't it? Frank Blount and Bob Joss in their book “Managing in Australia” argue that leaders don't need to change the way they are but that they should change their behaviours. Although this view is quite seductive, it has a definite sniff of simplicity about it.

While it is quite easy to define the sorts of behaviours an organisation expects to see in its leaders through a range of competency analysis techniques, how plausible is it for a leader to demonstrate the desired behaviours consistently across a range of situations, if they are not in line with his or her preferred ways of behaving? The competency-based approach to leadership development appears to miss a subtle but essential ingredient: Emotional Intelligence or EQ.

Put simply, EQ in this context is the capacity to deal effectively with every day 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. But EQ is neglected in most selection and leadership development interventions and seems to run counter to the dominant leadership style in Australia.

There are good reasons for organisations to recognise the importance of EQ. Leaders who engage in supportive behaviours such as showing consideration and concern are more effective in their roles. Those who demonstrate this personal style tend to have employees with higher job performance, enhanced job satisfaction, and stronger loyalty to their leader and organisation. Similarly, leaders who demonstrate understanding in their interactions with others engender a workplace that is characterised by their staff as more democratic and engaging.

This is not to say that other management qualities such as decision making, planning and the like are less germane. The key point is that EQ comprises part of a bigger leadership capability jigsaw.

For those organisations adopting a competency-based approach to leadership, EQ is particularly relevant with regard to three key leadership capabilities often found in the competency frameworks of progressive companies:

Coaching: 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. More than that, it is showing the consideration behaviours that underpin the whole notion of EQ. Dominant, aggressive leadership styles are simply ineffective at engaging people and unlocking their full potential.

Unlikely to be a surprise to many people is that leaders with high EQ are seen by their staff as more effective coaches. But this does beg the question: why is the predominant leadership style in many Australian organisations one that encourages a plethora of aggressive, dominant behaviours that have been known for some time to be ineffective? The very behaviours that in many ways represent the antithesis of the consideration style that underpins EQ.

Managing Diversity: In addition to ever-present gender issues, changes in society's cultural composition are eventually reflected in changes to an organisation's customer base and workforce. There is a need therefore for companies to have employees who appreciate people from diverse cultures and markets and also turn that appreciation into a competitive advantage. Turning a blind eye to issues of gender and cultural bias is exactly what allows discrimination to flourish. Leaders with high EQ are at an advantage here in that they will typically have the interpersonal savvy to speak up effectively against bias and discrimination. If leaders do this well, incidents of bias are likely to reduce and the fruits of a diverse workforce will flourish.

Teamwork: 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. Yet many organisations are still plagued by politics and

infighting at all leadership levels to the point where the climate is characterised by territory management, distrust, hostility and unhelpful competition.

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, experiencing friction, rivalries or resentment are much less likely to meet their objectives because people simply cannot be at their best. Harmonious high performing teams in most cases have generous helpings of EQ.

While many companies invest millions of dollars in selecting and developing their leadership talent aimed at changing key aspects leadership behaviour for the better, changing elements of a leader's EQ is altogether more difficult. Simply evaluating leadership capability and targeting development interventions on those areas of greatest need is a necessary but not sufficient step in creating truly world-class leadership capability. Changing behaviour is one thing, getting leaders to tackle issues that stem from the very essence of their personality, is something more complex and challenging.

So what pragmatic things can organisations do to increase the EQ in their leadership ranks? There are three broad strategies:

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 yielded here is invaluable but in many cases there is clearly an undue emphasis given to performance on cognitive reasoning or ability tests coupled with a tolerance or denial of potential issues raised within the arena of EQ. 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 not using assessment at all to pick up potential EQ issues when hiring or promoting, or ignoring issues raised without further exploration are simply treading on thin ice. They are much more likely to experience problems with their leadership talent pool further down the track. Similarly, organisations would be wise to take EQ into consideration when inviting leaders to join talent pools or fast-track development programs.

Secondly, competency-based leadership development programs should include a professional assessment of EQ and be reinforced with a strong element of personal coaching. This would ensure that problems related to EQ have a forum in which they can be addressed, and the relationship that develops between a leader and his or her personal coach can be used to

explore problem areas that are notoriously neglected in conventional leadership development initiatives. In many cases, personal coaches are experienced in holistic life and career counselling and are often able to adopt a broader perspective in helping leaders to work on issues that are sometimes only partly work-related, but nevertheless key to being a successful leader.

Thirdly, the performance management and development system needs to deal with problem leadership behaviours that are related to preferred leadership style. To do this requires absolute support from senior leaders in an organisation, particularly the CEO and the top team. There also needs to be supplementary assessment information that gives peers and direct reports in particular the opportunity to anonymously evaluate leaders in an organisation. 360° Feedback is particularly helpful here, and the information can be fed directly into the performance management and development process.

This is certainly not an assault on competency-based leadership programs. EQ and the competency-based approach are not in different corners of the ring. Quite the opposite, in fact. Developing initiatives that focus on what leaders need to do and marrying this with their preferred leadership style, is an approach that is more likely to help organisations develop outstanding leadership talent and realise a return on their investment. Frankly, many Australian companies are replete with leaders who genuinely believe that bullying people is the best way to get the best out of them. Recognising this means that another essential ingredient needs to be added to leadership development. As George Washington once said, "Let your heart feel for the afflictions and distresses of everyone".