

Social intelligence

How social intelligence can make you a better employer

Everyone understands that human relationships have personal consequences, but fewer people are aware of their underlying biology. “Social intelligence” is an umbrella term used to describe the neural biology of human relationship dynamics and its intentional application and automatic activation.

The term has gained wider recognition since the publication in 2006 of “Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships,” by Daniel Goleman.

“Advances in scientific research, aided by new technology, make it possible to observe the brain as we interact with others,” says Annette Kolski-Andreaco, LSW/MSW, MURP, an account executive for LifeSolutions, an employee assistance program (EAP) which is part of the UPMC Insurance Services Division. “The human brain is a social organ that changes and is changed by emotions generated in and by human relationships.”

Smart Business talked with Kolski-Andreaco about social intelligence and its importance to employers and employees.

What is social intelligence?

The term was coined in the 1920s, and it was defined as ‘acting wisely in relationships,’ as well as, ‘the ability to understand and manage men and women.’

A simple definition of social intelligence is the ability to connect with others in such a way that facilitates cooperation and collaboration. Social intelligence competencies fall into two main groups called social awareness and social facility. Social awareness describes those things that we sense about others — our gut reactions. This includes empathy. Social facility describes what we do with that social awareness. This can be how we try to influence a relationship, for example. It also includes concern or the feelings we display and that propel us to help another for the sake of the team.

Is social intelligence an important concept for employers?

It’s an important skill for everybody to know. But, that’s especially true for people in leadership positions for whom it is important to connect with the people they are leading on some basic level. In essence, social intelligence uses what we know about the biology of relationships to help leaders enhance the performance of the people they are leading.

Personal skills such as initiative, empathy,



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adaptability and persuasiveness are vital for a leader’s toolbox. Not being aware of the impact a leader is having on others can doom a leader, regardless of how competent in the subject matter he or she may be. A leader can sometimes disturb employees to such an extent that they are more anxious than they would otherwise be. By the same token, leaders can also moderate their behavior and mood to create an atmosphere of calm and creativity simply in how they relate to their employees. Who would you rather have leading a team in a crisis or when announcing layoffs, someone who is nervous or indifferent or the person who remains calm and also caring, seeking to spare others as much harm as possible? It’s true that if you don’t understand people, you can’t manage them.

Can a lack of social intelligence be a hindrance in business?

Yes, definitely. People who haven’t developed their social intelligence skills cannot connect effectively with others and may even alienate or offend them. That can be true both of employees and leaders alike. Everyone knows of examples of two people who have similar abilities and intelligence, but who are not similar in their achievement or success levels in business. In many cases, it is the person

who has the superior social intelligence who gets ahead.

Can people learn to become more proficient in social intelligence?

It’s important to know that all humans have a hard-wired capacity for social intelligence. While there is wide variability among people in terms of their ability to be socially intelligent, each of us possesses the potential to be more skillful at human relationships at work. Social intelligence, when applied to leadership, recognizes that the most important activity of a leader is to connect with others in order to amplify the latter’s performance.

People who learn to enhance their own social intelligence abilities are more successful in developing the creativity and productivity of those who report to them and, in turn, are more acknowledged for their leadership capabilities. Elements of social intelligence serve to reduce stress by moderating conflict, promoting understanding and relationships and fostering stability and cooperation.

What are some specific things that can be learned?

You can learn some specific skills; even those capacities that are automatic and hard-wired can be improved upon through training. This would include, for example, knowing what one is expected to do in any social situation. Similarly, one can learn to be better at reading non-verbal cues with practice and attention.

What does socially intelligent leadership look like?

You would have leaders who do not inhibit or impede others and who actively enhance the performance of others. They wish to genuinely know the people who work for them or work with them and seek to develop in them the desire to cooperate. Many of their efforts are geared toward creating a positive mood and, in turn, their employees contribute creatively and are more motivated. To these kinds of leaders, the way in which something is communicated is as important as the content of what’s communicated. <<

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