

Managing Emotions in the Workplace

Some time ago, we were contacted by a client who was having a significant challenge within the organization. The company was experiencing significant growth and was promoting managers and supervisors who were not trained to handle the stress and challenges of managing others. Even senior managers were struggling with the stress of rapid growth. After doing a little investigation, we discovered the main culprit – poorly developed “emotional intelligence” among middle and senior management.

Emotional intelligence, often called EQ, is the ability to recognize, understand and use the power of emotions to facilitate high levels of collaboration and productivity. In essence, it is the ability to effectively manage one’s own emotions.

When emotional intelligence is low, managers find themselves diverting time and energy to dealing with emotion-driven conflict among team members. And in some instances it is the manager’s own emotions that sabotage performance. An organization suffers the greatest productivity loss when a manager’s low EQ behavior impacts others within the organization. If managers are unable to manage their own emotions, their negative behavior can sap the energy of staff.

The emotions with the most potential to cause negative repercussions in the workplace are anger and fear, which can temporarily impair the brain’s ability to think rationally. The brain is wired to be on alert status from a threat of any kind, whether real or imagined. Anger and fear activate the brain’s “fight, flight or freeze” response, as the part of the brain that generates emotion floods the area in charge of executive functions with hormones.

As a result, attention, problem solving and access to memory are all impaired. A person’s planning and organizational abilities are diminished and his or her ability to concentrate is all but eliminated amid the distraction of trying to process their reactions and plan a response. Since logic and critical thinking are executive functions of the brain, the person’s ability to calm down is reduced as the emotional flooding continues. The longer the emotional flood gates are open, the more difficult it gets to get back on track.

Typically it can take up to four hours for the person’s thinking process to return to normal. Anyone who has ever struggled to stay focused after an emotional interlude knows this to be true.

So how do we help clients develop and improve their workplace EQ so they can stay on track? First, we establish the clear understanding that EQ is NOT about avoiding emotions at the workplace – that is an unreasonable expectation to set. Instead, EQ assesses how quickly you can move beyond your emotions to a point where you can effectively become productive.

There are two phases to EQ: Intrapersonal EQ (what happens inside a person), and Interpersonal EQ (what happens between oneself and others).

There are three dimensions to Intrapersonal EQ:

Self-awareness: The ability to recognize and understand your own moods, emotions and drives, as well as their effect on others.

Self- Regulation: The ability to suspend judgment so as to think before acting, and to enable oneself to choose to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods.

Motivation: A propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence, sometimes with a passion to work for reasons that go beyond a desire for money or status.

There are two dimensions to Interpersonal EQ:

Empathy: The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people.

Social Skills: A proficiency in managing relationships and building networks.

The first step to developing EQ is to become more “self-aware.” This self-awareness is the essential building block for EQ development. What does it feel like to be in an emotional state? When do you know you are in such a state? When have you recently felt out of control to your emotions?

Once individuals are aware that they are in an emotional state, they can work toward “self-regulation,” where they practice techniques and methods for controlling their disruptive emotions. These are the two critical steps in managing EQ. Once individuals have worked on self-awareness and self-regulation, they are more able to quickly become motivated to act and to work collaboratively with others using empathy and social skills.

Our work involves helping individuals understand EQ conceptually and work on developing their skills at each step of the EQ spectrum. In some cases, we administer an online EQ assessment that helps individuals identify their own emotional development in each of these five dimensions.

And here’s the good news: Once people learn about emotional intelligence and its components – and I do mean simply becoming aware of the dimensions of emotional intelligence – they are better able to develop and improve their own EQ. It’s a learning that lasts for life – once they learn to manage their emotions, they will always be better able to do so.

In our client’s case, it was clear that their managers had a high potential for superior performance but had been falling short of it due to a lack of emotional stability. Fortunately, by simply learning about emotional intelligence – being able to recognize when and why they are in an emotional state and then knowing the techniques that can regulate their emotions – their abilities as managers improved dramatically.

In other words, a little bit of EQ training went a long way in enabling managers to develop themselves and their direct reports in profound and sustaining ways – a win-win for the whole team and the company at large.

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