



Social Intelligence:

The Social IQ of Leadership

Studies show that socially intelligent leaders stand way above the rest when measured in terms of their people's performance, engagement, and productivity and their company's profits. This article talks what makes a socially intelligent leader.

by **Bob Murray and Alicia Fortinberry**

Jonathon was hired by a large multinational legal firm to head up their New York litigation department. Smart and legally excellent, Jonathon had a strong reputation for winning cases at the two previous firms he had worked for. His new firm was delighted to have snared him.

However, soon after he began working for his new employers things started to go wrong. Several of his fellow partners complained about him and a number of the lawyers working under him either quit or insisted that they be transferred to other partners or even other offices. The partnership began to see him as a possible liability rather than an asset.

Eventually it became clear that

Jonathon had managed to turn most of his colleagues and team members off in a very short time. His fellow partners found him arrogant and unwilling to share work or contacts. His team found him a hard task master who almost never praised his people even when they had brought in new clients or pulled all-nighters to prepare court documents. His frowning demeanor and brusque tone added to the impression that all he cared about were the details of the work and peoples' billable hours, not the people themselves.

Jonathan's job was on the line because of his lack of social skills. He did not know how to genuinely connect to people, much less inspire, motivate and thus effectively lead them. He did

not, to use the phrase popularised by Daniel Goleman, a best-selling author in psychology and leadership, possess "social intelligence" (Social IQ).

It was only when confronted by the possibility of being asked to leave that, he began to take the first tentative steps toward acquiring the social skills that could not only rescue his career but potentially turn him into an effective leader. These same skills had the potential to make him a better husband, father and friend.

What makes a socially intelligent leader?

What sets great or even good leaders apart is their ability to engage others, to get

them committed to a real or even potential relationship with them. Socially intelligent leaders focus on people, motivate them to high levels of performance, and help them develop to their highest potential. They engender commitment through a combination of empathy, praise and good dialogue skills that make people feel understood and valued.

Study after study shows that these socially intelligent leaders stand way above the rest when measured in terms of their peoples' performance, engagement, and productivity and their company's profits.¹

Although sometimes forgotten in the face of short-term pressures to beef up the bottom line (usually with disastrous mid- to long-term consequences), it is not surprising that people skills are so important in business.

Our socially intelligent brain and genes

Human beings are relationship-forming animals. From the moment we are born our survival depends on our relationship-forming abilities. Our social intelligence is hard-wired into our brains and our genes.

A few years ago scientists developed powerful new tools for observing what was happening in the brain in real time. The most revolutionary of these was the fMRI (functional magnetic resonating imager), a scanner which tracks the change in blood flow and lights up when certain parts of the brain are activated. Because we now have a better understanding of what those parts do, we can often tell what is going on emotionally.

For example, we can see the damaging effects of non-productive criticism on the person and their performance. Bullying, criticism and blame activate the fear centre of the brain, called the amygdala. The fear centre then shuts down the reasoning and learning parts of the brain

in order to prepare the person's "flight, fright or freeze" reaction as if there were a physical danger. If this response is repeatedly engaged, the person's ability to do their job well, and their commitment to their work and their leader, is greatly diminished. There can also be serious long-term consequences to physical and mental health.



Praise is the most powerful Social IQ tool that a leader has at his or her command.

On the other hand, using the fMRI scanner, we can see that when people feel safe within the context of their relationships, when they are praised, rewarded and made to feel worthwhile, their striatum (the trust and relationship centre of the brain) lights up. They get a surge of the reward neurochemical dopamine (sometimes called the "happiness chemical"). This energises and enables them to learn and accept feedback more easily, to find solutions to problems and to work smarter as well as harder. They become more committed to the manager or colleague who rewards or praises them, and also to the firm as a whole.

New information about the brain even helps us understand the basis of empathy and the power

of good role models. Brain cells called "mirror neurons" enable us to literally feel what other people are feeling. That is why people tend to gasp and even reach out their hands when they see someone stumble. We also tend to smile and feel happier when people around us are smiling and laughing. Conversely, we can feel sad, depressed or angry when people

demonstrate those feelings.

Mirror cells also enable a child to know what his or her parent is feeling and do what the parent does. In an





organisation,
these cells
prompt followers
to “mirror” leaders’

emotions and actions. That is what being a positive role model is all about. A leader with high Social IQ therefore visibly demonstrates the emotions and behaviours he or she wants employees to adopt.

When you take into account how the brain really works, it is clear that the old “carrot and stick” leadership style, still employed in many companies, does not make so much sense. While it is important to set clear expectations, you get more done with a smile than with a threat.

Even our very genes respond to people’s mood and actions around us. Our genes, including those related to personality, operate differently when we are with different people and in different situations. As you may have noticed for yourself, with some people we can be outward-going and extroverted and others shy and introverted. In some workplaces we can shine because we feel supported and valued and in others we feel undermined and are unable to deliver our best. With some people we tend to optimism and with others towards pessimism.

Becoming socially intelligent

We may be born with the genetics and neurochemistry of Social IQ, but the skills required to fully capitalise on this biological hardware are learned. Most people can kick a ball but they have to learn to kick it into a goal. The drive to become a parent is innate, but that does not mean you automatically know the best way to raise a child. The skills needed for that role are acquired by observation and other forms of learning.

Jonathon had to learn to tap into and use his Social IQ. He had to learn how to appropriately praise those who reported to him. This was not easy, for many people like him there were no praise-giving role models in their childhood. Yet praise is the most powerful Social IQ tool that a leader has at his or her command.

Jonathon also had to reopen himself to his capacity for empathy and his ability to demonstrate caring. This involved actually listening to what people said and showing interest in them not just the information or the task. He learned to ask more questions and to pause to give people time to respond or to offer their views. He discovered that although he gave lots of directions, he did not take the time to explain what or why he needed certain things done, or to find out if people understood. He even learned the art of getting people to honestly tell him what they thought and needed from him in order to do their best. He found that he did not have to do everything people asked of him, and in fact that they respected him for honestly setting boundaries and managing expectations. Yet he also made real efforts to negotiate and find ways to get both his real needs and other’s met.

Obviously, this process took time. Jonathan was skeptical at first, made mistakes and often became frustrated. His first real win came, oddly enough, at home when his wife said he was much nicer to be around since he had started to complement her for what she did that he liked rather than always pointing out what she did wrong.

Gradually his colleagues and even his team began to respond differently as well—tentatively at first since there was some suspicion that this was “all for show” and would not last. However, the

more he smiled, asked how people were and looked for things to praise them for, the more they seemed genuinely to want to please him and put in extra effort. He found that he enjoyed it when they smiled rather than looked frightened when he entered the room or they passed him in the hall. His colleagues also showed they valued his opinions and his company.

He found that he enjoyed himself more with others. To his surprise, when he asked about peoples’ lives as well as work, he found himself actually interested in the answers and willing to genuinely respond about himself. Jonathan’s “graduation” came when he was able to give some very negative feedback to a team member with such skill that the person really heard it and was committed to taking on board the feedback while maintaining a trusting relationship with Jonathan.

A year later Jonathan’s upward feedback was among the best in the firm, and he was asked to take on a higher leadership role within the group. His client list grew even larger as clients began to feel he was really interested in them. A few times he slipped back into his old ways, creating some concern among those around him. At one time he asked for some additional coaching to cope with a time of stress. But he had seen the value of focusing on social intelligence and was determined not to lose what he—and his firm—had gained. **HR**

¹ For example “Multiple Intelligences of Transformational Leaders: An empirical examination.” *International Journal of Manpower* 27:1:2006.

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