

Improving the emotional intelligence of coachees

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Developing emotional intelligence leads to greater self-awareness and the ability to change disruptive emotions.

At a basic level, coaching can be about simply helping someone to solve a problem or perform a task better. This type of coaching is a tool every manager should have in their toolkit. However, professional coaches are often faced with coachees who require change at a deeper level. The individual may need coaching around the bigger picture of their life and be looking to find purpose, meaning and identity.

Sometimes coachees start off wanting strategies to deal with the external realities such as improving time management or getting on better with others. However, the process of coaching itself develops a realisation in them that this type of coaching is only a tinkering at the edges. Transformational change will require a different type of approach. For the long-term efficacy of any coaching, then, developing the emotional intelligence (EI) of a coachee is a must.

A substantial amount of research has shown that for people to be successful in business and their overall lives, EQ is more important than IQ.¹ IQ, a measure of intelligence (abstract, verbal and numerical) remains largely unchanged from early childhood. EQ – the measure of someone’s emotional intelligence – however, can be improved well into later life. Daniel Goleman said that in any kind of job the importance of EQ was 66 per cent, compared to 33 per cent for IQ.

In business the difference between the mediocre manager and the high-flyer is often their EI. IQ is not a great predictor of success. We can all identify the geeky rocket-scientist stereotype whose intellect is out of this world, but whose people skills are on another planet. In a leader, EQ is particularly important, accounting for 85 per cent compared to 15 per cent for IQ.

There is now a vast amount of data for EI, and it is becoming more widely acknowledged in business circles and among the public that EI is the ideal route for self-development. However, there is still a lack of clarity about how to develop EI.

Why is it difficult to improve emotional intelligence?

- 1 There are various psychometrics available to measure EI. These include Hay ECI² and EQ Bar-On,³ and these are good starting points to enable the coach and coachee to focus on areas of improvement. Consideration will need to be given to whether it is more effective to coach someone on their weaknesses, as is traditional, or to look at the EI competence where they are already strong and make it even better – particularly if it is in the key areas of self-awareness and empathy.

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Along with self-awareness, empathy has been identified as one of the more important EI competences – that is, sensing others’ emotions, understanding their perspective and taking an active interest in their concerns. Understanding the theory behind emotional responses to difficult situations and the link between thought, emotions, feelings and behaviour helps coachees to be clear about what is happening to them and to be aware that it happens to all humans. We also look at how they show their behaviour via body language, voice and tone. (As the coach you can give them direct observable feedback on this – it is valuable for corporate coachees in senior positions who suffer from what Goleman calls the chief executive’s disease, in which no one wants to take the risk of giving the boss ‘constructive’ feedback.) A little input from the coach around perceptions – and the way beliefs, values and upbringing affect perception of people and situations by filtering and distorting our picture of reality – is a good precursor to developing empathy.

Conclusion

So, in essence, EI can be developed, but not in a one- or two-day seminar. It requires a method such as coaching that allows individual tailoring, plenty of time to reflect on personal learning and constant practice to ingrain new habits.

Case study 1 Margaret

Margaret needed to control her short temper and her propensity to snap at people when under stress, so coaching became more directional. I showed her techniques to manage stress, change negative thought patterns and pick strategies to stop small irritations escalating into full-blown anger. The flicking of an elastic band on her wrist just as she felt her mood changing was enough to break the habitual cycle, create a time lag (this prevented an amygdala hijack by allowing 6-10 seconds to elapse, short-circuiting the usual emotional pathway to allow a more reasoned approach to the situation she was facing).

The amygdala is the emotional storehouse of the brain, whereas the thalamus or cortex is the thinking part. When emotionally aroused, the cortex is by-passed and the trigger that is stimulating the emotional response can go straight to the amygdala. This is useful in situations where we don’t have time to think, such as emergencies. More often, though, it leads us to say something harmful to escalate the situation. From the hijacked position the brain is flooded with electrochemicals which stunt rational thought until the chemicals dissipate (in about 6 seconds).

Case study 2 – Paul

Paul was oblivious to the impact he was having on his staff, who found him aggressive and overbearing. He was very task focused and operationally a success, but his staff did not enjoy working for him and harassment complaints were made. His self-awareness and empathy radar was not tuned in to how others saw him. During my work with Paul, feedback about his style had to be very direct and to the point. His body language was quite dominant and aggressive, which I reflected back to him. We also did some coaching around various one-to-one meetings that he found difficult (for example, subordinates complaining of being undermined and intimidated). We used the empty-chair technique for him to practise new methods of using words and tone in a more assertive rather than an aggressive way, as well as him putting himself literally into the other person’s chair and imagining how it felt for them. Observing the two chairs from a third observer position also showed him the impression he was giving to others.

References

- 1 Chemiss, Goleman, Emmerling, Cowan and Adler, *Bringing Emotional Intelligence to the Workplace*, technical report issued by the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organisations, 1998. See http://www.eiconsortium.org/research/technical_report.pdf
- 2 Hay ECI, www.eihaygroup.com
- 3 EQ Bar-On, www.eiconsortium.org
- 4 Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *The New Leaders*, Little Brown, 2002.

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Emotional intelligence is a key factor of overall success in life

- The limbic system, the emotional storehouse of the brain, is a slow learner. The challenge for coachees to unlearn and relearn new behaviour requires lots of practice, feedback and motivation. Coaching, as opposed to a more formal training programme, is ideally placed to provide this environment, although the time factor can be a big limitation.
- In a business context, the amount of time and money willingly invested may vary. Both coachees and organisations often want quick wins. When we talk about time, it is not just a matter of the investment of the coachee going through a development programme, attending sessions and doing homework. It is often a long-term commitment that takes months or years. If the research is saying that EQ can be improved until old age, this means the time commitment is limitless for the

individual – there will always be work in progress. In business, it is important to be clear about what can be achieved within the time span agreed, with the proviso that this will vary from individual to individual.

In my experience with clients, the initial contracted coaching is only the start of the process. After six to eight sessions of coaching, the individual starts to see enough changes to drive their own motivation to continue on their journey to greater awareness. This often stimulates them to continue the coaching of their own accord (investing their own money and time if it has been employer sponsored previously). Clients often report that they carry on their personal development in other formal or informal ways after having their eyes opened by initial coaching. This can take the form of learning how to coach others, training in other therapies such

as counselling, or changing career to follow a path more consistent with their values and new awareness about goals and vision for life.

As mentioned before, the process can be slow when the challenge is to relearn deeply ingrained habits. This is emotional learning. Re-educating the brain requires lots of practice and repetition. As an adult we have an uphill battle to reprogramme our brains against ingrained patterns, but it can be done. A crucial element in development is motivation. As it takes longer to change the limbic brain processes, then there has to be a more concerted effort – it takes more effort to strengthen ability such as empathy than to become adept at risk analysis, which involves mainly cognitive

learning. However, once limbic processes are changed, they remain so indefinitely.

Which emotional intelligence competences do you develop first?

The main focus has to be on developing self-awareness first. As Goleman pointed out, if you lack self-awareness you have virtually no chance – only about 4 per cent – of being able to self-manage. As many of my clients are looking to change disruptive emotions such as anger and self-doubt, we need to build self-awareness first.

A quick and easy check on how aware they are is to get them to relax, close their eyes, remain quiet for a minute or two and then tell you what they are aware of. Most people will mention external things such as temperature of room, buzz of air conditioning and breeze from a window rather than internal things

such as their breathing, tension in their muscles or inner chatter.

They can then practise each day to start listening to themselves and become present in the here and now. This will increase their awareness and help them to understand the link between what they are feeling and their emotions. Ultimately this leads to recognising the impact they may have on others. I build more self-awareness by taping my sessions and giving the cassettes to my coachees so that they can listen to the tape as a third person and gain new insights from a different perspective. It helps them to see how they are moving on in each session to note the changes and improvements from session 1 through to session 6 or 7.

Daniel Goleman in *The New Leaders*⁴ said that people who successfully change tend to go through five stages. I use those stages to help structure the overall sessions and build in some activities.

The first discovery: my ideal self – Who do I want to be?

This involves painting a visionary picture (either literally or through creative visualisation) of how they would see themselves in the future. They can look at this picture daily to reinforce where they are heading. The brain will respond as if this is already current reality and seek to fill the gap between where they are now and where they want to be. This picture if done mentally needs to be as vivid and real as possible. Brain studies have shown that imagining something in vivid detail can fire the brain cells that are involved in the activity itself.

The second discovery: my real self – Who am I? What are my strengths and gaps?

Goal-setting activities that focus on strengths rather than weaknesses provide motivation. They are also a

key element in self-awareness. Learners must acknowledge their strengths because if they focus on just the negative, then the gaps tend to create anxiety and stop the self-directed learning required to make changes.

The third discovery: my learning agenda – How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?

Look at gaps once motivation levels are high. Coach around what the benefits of developing these weaknesses would be. Find out the hot buttons of the coachee rather than relying on what others want them to change – for example, in organisational coaching the coachee may have been told what they are expected to work on. Goals must be a person's own, not imposed.

The fourth discovery: experimenting with and practising new behaviours, thoughts and feelings to the point of mastery

Target specific EI competences that they need to work on. This has longer-lasting results than vague targets. If it is work-based learning, they can try things out at home with family members – for example, learning to become a

better listener by practising at home and with friends. The most telling, though least visible, sign of self-awareness is the propensity for self-reflection and thoughtfulness. Again, this can be built into the session itself, by asking them to reflect on their learning, or between sessions where they complete a reflective journal about what they have noticed about themselves and others. Overlearning by constant repetition is also crucial to enable the new skills to stick.

The fifth discovery: developing supportive trusting relationships that can make change possible.

Coaching can also help them to establish a support network. A useful activity is to ask the coachee to list everyone in their network and then mark against each the ones who will help them to change and the ones who may sabotage their attempts. (Some people have a vested interest in keeping you the same.) I then coach them on what the people on the support list can do in practical terms to give support – such as booster chats on the phone, honest feedback, condolences when the road is sticky, praise and reward when achievements are reached.

I N T E R N A L	Self-awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional self-awareness • Accurate self-assessment • Self-confidence 	Self-management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional self-control • Transparency • Adaptability • Achievement • Optimism
	Social awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Organisational awareness • Service 	Relationship management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspirational leadership • Developing others • Change catalyst • Conflict management • Building bonds • Teamwork and collaboration
E X T E R N A L		

Fig. 1: The four key areas of emotional intelligence