

**Corporate Training in Emotional Intelligence:
Effective Practice or Modern ‘Fugazy’?**

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About the authors

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Abstract

The article presents a viewpoint for conducting corporate training programmes aimed at soft skills, using comprehension of the Emotional Intelligence concept. The purpose of the article is, by disclosing some of the flaws and failures of such programmes, to offer new solutions directed towards overcoming automatic defence mechanisms; a coping technique that reduces anxiety which hinders personal development by making individuals unwilling to learn and act outside their usual comfort zone of behaviours.

Are Corporate Training Programmes Effective?

For many years now, designing and providing corporate training programmes have been the main concern for many Human Resource (HR) consulting companies (Waters, 2014). In the majority of such cases the training modules, provided on

different employee levels, are aimed to develop behaviours that would assist attainment of business goals, boost motivation and job involvement. However, training does not always show benefits in subsequent bottom line measures (e.g., objective indicators such as revenues, productivity, and absenteeism) (Salas, 2012).

Training activities may also have remedial purposes; when an employee is sent to a training programme because they do not practice the desired behaviours (which may be simply because this person lacks the motivation to do so). Naturally, when the employee returns to the work environment, they do not apply any of the taught practices (Bovey & Hede, 2001).

The annual report of American Society for Training and Development (ASTD, 2009) underlines that while American Companies have spent 47.3 billion dollars on external training providers, 62% of clients feel that those programmes have failed to reach their expectations in terms of financial impact; with employees not acquiring the targeted competencies and behaviours (ASTD, 2009). Taking a closer look at the European Union we can detect similar problems. The Education and Training Monitor (2013) reports research stating that only one of five adults implement the knowledge they have learned or somehow memorised. While this research focuses mainly on institutional education, the report stresses that a substantial part of the data comes from business and entrepreneurship sources (OECD 2013).

As a logical sequel to these unsatisfactory training effects organizational leaders and programme sponsors are dissatisfied with the outcomes of these costly, time consuming activities. Therefore HR consultants are facing a tremendous challenge to reverse these outcomes by changing consulting practices to enhance the faith of their customers and increase the effectiveness of the soft skills training programmes. The purpose of this article is to discuss an effective approach that will encourage the abandonment of ineffective training patterns and will encourage the behavioural changes expected when employing HR consultants.

The Missing Ingredient is Emotional Intelligence

The most common mistake in designing a training programme is the conception that the core part lies in its content. This puts the emphasis on learning of new skills and models of behaviour, with the demand on participants to adopt them (even when we speak of 'soft skills' which is the case in many HR programmes). It is already known that neither the abundance, nor the scarcity of information and knowledge is sufficient to provoke individuals to question old behavioural habits (Ajzen, 1991; Bovey & Hede, 2001; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Strong determinants for change are individual emotional needs (Bowen, 2014; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The key point of our thesis is that by using the *Emotional Intelligence* (EI) concept, training practices could be easily rectified and employees encouraged to undertake new lines of behaviour.

The EI concept, though gaining most of its popularity as a result of the work of Daniel Goleman (1998), was originally created by Mayer and Salovey (1997). While other authors have also discussed the meaning of emotions, the definition of the main aspects of EI is undoubtedly Salovey and Mayer's contribution. According to their theory, EI is multidimensional construct composed of three main dimensions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997): a) Appraisal and Expression of Emotions; b) Utilisation of Emotions; and c) Regulation of Emotions which we will discuss in the next section. It is not a coincidence that the same behaviours described by these two authors have a defining role for the success of 'soft skills' training programmes (Nelis, Quoidbach, Mikolajczak & Hansenne, 2009). That is why the focus here is on these three factors, and their constructive role in personnel training practices. We review these factors in order to convince readers of their significance for understanding human behaviour in organizations.

Emotional Intelligence at Work

Appraisal and Expression of Emotions

This dimension of EI includes self-knowledge, awareness of one's emotions and also the emotions of others expressed in both verbal and non-verbal ways. So, it becomes clear how we can deliver behaviour change as a result of well held training programme. As we know, the main 'culprits' for stability of the mind-set and behavioural models are *defence mechanisms*; those are acts, coping techniques or

mechanisms that reduce anxiety that may be generated by threats from unacceptable or negative impulses (Schacter, 2011). Their purpose is to defend the personality from attacks of the surrounding environment, and the realisation of facts detected as threatening for the individual's self-image. Defence mechanisms are usually unconscious, unlike conscious coping strategies (Kramer, 2009). It is important to know that the modern view of defence mechanisms goes far beyond a psychoanalytical or psychiatric approach. Today this phenomenon is understood in terms of social and organizational resistance to change (Bovey & Hede, 2001) and is described as being 'in the border context of stress and coping' (Villant, 1988, p. 200). These are the states of mind that often accompany behavioural change and career progress (Fabio & Kenny, 2014). Defence mechanisms are triggered during increased levels of emotional discomfort; mainly by feelings of anxiety.

Therefore, we can conclude that if we expect the skills and behaviours presented during training to be tried out in real work situations, we have to educate the participants how to identify their defences and how to respond when defences are activated. Specifically, during training participants have to be trained how to withhold the urge for backtracking to old, secure behavioural models; and how to prolong their abidance in the area/zone of discomfort (also known as Quadrant II), simply because this area is the only possible place in which the beginning of behavioural changes can be marked. *'To learn new skills or techniques means that you must enter Quadrant II. Yet this is the place where there can be most anxiety/panic/unpleasant feelings. These are stress-related emotions. For many people they respond by retreating and avoiding the learning experience; they quit.'* (Morgan, 2005, p. 41).

For example, recently a participant in a training on negotiation skills declared: *"I've been to many similar trainings, and on theory everything looks easy and applicable. But when I try any of these in a real situation I got so tangled, felt so uncomfortable like it is not me out there. Last time I recon the client felt that I'm trying to apply some gimmicks on him and the negotiation turned against me. At the end of the day I had to play the lowest price possible just to close the deal. Instead of gaining more profit through wider margin, my company got the minimum from that deal. So my opinion is just be yourself, because being somebody else is not working."* In this example, the

“gimmicks” that the client might have felt are nothing else but the inability of the seller to hold on to their own anxiety and activation of defence mechanisms that simply triggered the ‘fly response’ when the trainee is in the discomfort zone. Obviously, the trainee was not trained or prepared to cope with such states. We recommend entering business interactions, such as sales negotiations, only with tested and proven behaviours, and to try new behaviours in more secure situations during role plays, business simulations, and workshops.

Utilisation of Emotions

Going back to EI and the dimensions of the construct, the second dimension is *utilization of emotions*. It is interesting to mention that one of the main reasons for psychologists to start searching for something different than IQ (classic cognitive intelligence), was the need to explain why some people are experiencing career and life setbacks and are unable to connect with others despite the intellectual abilities they possess. Further, to question why others, not so gifted with intellect, are performing better and are showing better career achievements. Utilisation of ones emotions turned out to be one of the factors determining that difference (Goleman, 1998). Led by the same interest many researchers today focus on emotions in the workplace, because they have the understanding that emotions hold a central place for increasing our understanding of individual work motivation (George & Brief, 1996; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). It is not a secret that the process of keeping high personal motivation towards work achievement and professional realisation is closely tied with this ability to utilise emotions. This is a core ability to develop in participants if we expect them to apply the taught skills and behaviours in a work environment. It is well known that mastering a new behaviour to the level of becoming a habit is hard, could be strenuous or even fatiguing, and requires a high level of personal motivation (Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010).

Take for example a simple skill that many training programmes are trying to develop in order to improve the customer service abilities - the *positive refusal skill* (i.e., a skill to refuse a demand from a customer without provoking negative emotions). This is a simple technique to understand and not hard to apply in role plays. But, to execute well in a work situation requires complete mastery and automation. In most

of cases, just few days after the training is over, participants will try the technique with some of their customers. This technique involves statements or strategies such as *“What I can do for you is..... because unfortunately our policy does not allow reduction of the price bigger than the one written in the general conditions”*.

However, after only a few weeks, the employee’s answer usually goes back to an old ineffective strategy such as *“I cannot give you bigger reduction than the one written in the general terms.”* The difference between those two strategies is obvious: in the first case the client receives a message willing help from the salesperson; while in the second case the message is a direct refusal. The gradual fading away of the desire to apply the positive-refusal technique is due to reduced zeal toward the new role, often triggered by the dynamics of the training (such as the charisma of the trainer and other factors Rynes & Rosen, 2006). In other words, if the extrinsic or intrinsic motivation is lacking, behaviour follows the path of least resistance back to the old habits; and the employee starts doing what they always have done. But isn’t that what we wanted to change in first place?

The development of self-motivation ability is maybe the most valuable part of the EI concept. By developing awareness of their own emotional responses to specific situations, employees will be able to use their strengths, and avoid, or at least control, their weaknesses. Such a structured knowledge of one’s emotions enables learning from mistakes and failures, and integrating them as useful experience, instead of falling into denial, rejection, or depression (Druskat, Sala & Mount, 2006). Equipped with EI, employees can master the ability to ‘recharge’ again and again (i.e., avoid burnout), and to keep following their goals and objectives, even when it is hard, tiresome and the reward is not within arm’s reach (Chang, Sy, & Choi, 2012; Druskat et al., 2006).

Regulation of Emotions

Finally comes the third dimension of EI; the regulation of emotions. Indeed, it is very important to have control over one’s emotional reactions in every aspect of life; both professional and personal (Bowen, 2014). EI has been shown to enable individuals to regulate negative emotions (Sevdalis, Petrides, & Harvey, 2007). By learning how to put a cognitive frame over seemingly uncontrollable emotions (in other words, by

reframing or changing the meaning of the emotion), a person could restrain impulsivity and behaviours often described as ‘the jerk instinct’ (acting before thinking). Undoubtedly such ability is also important in situations of team work and/or customer service (Schlaerth, Ensari, & Christian, 2013). The realisation of how our emotions could interfere with our goals, but also be just a moment away from being the propulsive force for achieving them, is the basic tool in behavioural change (Vlaev & Dolan, 2015). So, by using the EI concept we can build that bridge between knowledge and its behavioural application. This is the bridge that we can honestly say is missing from most of corporate soft skills training programmes (ASTD, 2009).

Behaviour change models

There are quite a few concepts and models proclaiming that they can provoke and successfully manage personal change and adoption of new behavioural models. One of them is the 6-Sigma management model (Mikel & Schroeder, 2000) which is a quality-management approach concentrating on identifying, quantifying, and driving out errors in business processes, customer service and employee performance. The behavioral change and organizational transformations are achieved through leadership, customer-centric goals, teamwork, customer-focused metrics, and control of costs. Many organizations (e.g., Motorola, Dell, and General Electric) have used this model to achieve undisputable results in cost savings, market share, and optimisation of work process. But, researchers and the many of the critics of the model often argue that it provokes conflicts in the process of competition for resources, executive attention, and organizational power; thus inducing uncertainty and anxiety (Nelish, Satish, Swati, 2012).

The other popular model that impacts on organizational as well as personal change is the ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006). ADKAR stands for: a) Awareness of the need for change; b) Desire to make the change happen; c) Knowledge about how to change; d) Ability to implement new skills and behaviors; e) Reinforcement to retain the change once it has been made. Basically, this is a goal-oriented change model that allows change management teams to focus their activities on specific business results, reached by adoption of new roles and behaviours within the organization. The model emphasises the impotency to diagnose employee resistance to change

before starting change actions; and we certainly agree with that part of the ADKAR concept. Even though within the frame of that approach the emotional component is taken into account and made more tangible, ADKAR does little about employees' ability to retain integrity and composure when they are under the influence of stress and anxiety (which is an invariable part of any significant change).

There are many other models, some of them widely recognised like Organizational Learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1986), but the purpose of that article is not to argue the feasibility of any of these models. We believe that each model could be good enough for the consultant if they attend to the three main issues: a) to overcome the defences against change; b) to provide the element of self-awareness; and c) to ignite the process of self-regulation of motivation. Emotional processes can give the momentum for behaviour change, and thus turn into a mover of the whole organisational culture; or emotions could become the 'stick in the spokes' and hinder the much needed adoption of new sets of behaviours.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, why EI? Is EI a legitimate concept when applied to the practical aspects of corporate training, or, is it just another way to sell more, to promise more, to palm off another gleaming product to our clients; a modern 'fugazy'? This article argues it is not! For many of us (management scholars and HR professionals) EI provides the shortcut to those three factors (overcoming defences against change, providing self-awareness; and igniting the process of self-regulation of motivation) that facilitate change. We believe that when the potential of EI is recognised as a legitimate part of behavioural change we could open a new chapter for different roles and career opportunities as well as improving organizational functioning. This is achieved by addressing the needs for training and personal development connected with emotions and their regulation, and with the ability to cope and overcome the tendencies of resistance. This will help us address those tendencies that are so typical for all of us especially when we need to do things differently in our life, in our organizations, and in our training.

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