

Social Intelligence: Beyond IQ

BY KARL ALBRECHT

We all know that getting along with people is important to business success. But we're just beginning to understand that this ability represents a particular kind of intelligence, one that can be nurtured and developed.

“You’re wrong. You’re dead wrong, and I’ll tell you why.”

That statement, and a few others that came after it, may have caused the loss of several million dollars’ worth of business for a company I worked for many years ago. The person hearing the statement was a high-ranking civilian technical expert working for the U.S. Department of Defense. The person making the statement was an associate of mine I’ll call Jack, a young man with considerable technical knowledge but few discernible social skills.

He and I were meeting with the government expert for the first time. Our mission was to begin building a relationship that would enable us to acquaint him and his colleagues with our technical capabilities as a firm, and by that means create a competitive advantage for us as a contractor for defense business.

The government expert had just voiced a rather strong—and largely unsupportable—opinion about the future prospects of a particular type of technology. My colleague Jack, apparently blind to the larger context for the conversation, could not let this act of technical blasphemy go unanswered. He had to set this man straight. In short order, they were engaged in a heated debate.

Far from achieving our objective of building a basis for a mutually respectful relationship, we were rapidly achieving exactly the opposite. Before I was able to shift the discussion back to neutral ground, the damage had been done. We never got another meeting with him or any of his colleagues.

I eventually came to understand that Jack was well supplied with abstract intelligence—the IQ kind—but short on social intelligence (SI).

In the more than two decades since this enlightening episode, I’ve been fascinated by the differences in the ways people manage the interpersonal experience. I believe this ability to get along with people represents a kind of intelligence in itself, quite apart from the usual IQ that academics, psychologists and educators have studied so diligently. I’ve studied this set of competencies, trying to discern or create a coherent framework for describing it, observing it and—most importantly—developing it if possible.

The concept of social intelligence as one of a set of key life competencies is an idea whose time has arrived. It crystallizes much of what we know about an important dimension of human effectiveness.

Multiple Intelligences

SI is perhaps best understood as one of a range of interwoven competencies. For some years now, Harvard Professor Howard Gardner has been preaching the idea that

human intelligence is not a single trait, as devotees of the IQ cult have always claimed. According to Gardner, we humans have seven or eight distinct intelligences, or primary dimensions of competence. Even the public education establishment has come to accept Gardner’s view, at least in principle (how well they apply the concept to educational design remains an open question).

With due regard for Professor Gardner’s contributions and with an eye toward making the multiple intelligences (MI) concept accessible beyond academia, it’s time we bestow official recognition on the idea and bring it into everyday consciousness.

The first step in understanding social intelligence is to place it into the context of Gardner’s MI categories. While Gardner uses rather scientific-sounding labels for his categories—verbal-logical, mathematical-symbolic, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and musical—we can recast them into everyday language and simplify them conceptually. For our purposes, we can settle on a distilled version of Gardner’s admirable theory.

We can rearrange Gardner’s multiple smarts into six primary categories:

1. **Abstract intelligence:** symbolic reasoning
2. **Social intelligence:** dealing with people
3. **Practical intelligence:** getting things done
4. **Emotional intelligence:** self-awareness and self-management
5. **Aesthetic intelligence:** the sense of form, design, music, art and literature
6. **Kinesthetic intelligence:** whole-body skills like sports, dance or flying a jet fighter

Others could argue for a somewhat different set of subdivisions, but these six categories work fairly well, and they have the modest additional advantage of spelling out a memorable acronym: ASPEAK.

We might think of these six basic intelligences like the six faces of a cube, each positioned at angles to the others and all coming together to form a whole. Surely the “Renaissance human,” the success model most of us admire, would have a strong and well-integrated combination of all six intelligences. The evidence from developmental research suggests that the basis for each of the six intelligences takes shape early in life. We know less about whether adults can make significant gains in these dimensions, but that possibility certainly appeals to many of us.

In recent years, the developmental possibilities for the MI model have gained credence through the work of another Harvard professor, Daniel Goleman, and his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It May Be More Important Than IQ* (Bantam, 1995). Goleman’s work contributed greatly to the growing acceptance of emotional intelligence and the notion of intelligence

as a dimension of competence that people can study, think about, learn about and improve.

Considered together, Gardner, Goleman and other contributors to the MI and EI models have done a great service—not only by legitimizing the concept of MI, but also by inviting us to pay attention to the other dimensions.

Next At Bat: Social Intelligence

If we can construct a model for describing, assessing and developing SI, then we can add another important piece to the MI model. We can characterize SI as a combination of a basic understanding of people—a kind of strategic social awareness—and a set of skills for interacting successfully with them. It's the capacity to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you.

possibility of describing, assessing and developing social intelligence in terms of observable behaviors. Each of the five dimensions can be deconstructed into a set of representative behaviors that may range from highly ineffective to highly effective.

Toxic Or Nourishing?

Another personal experience, also more than a decade ago, finally brought the concept of SI into focus for me. I had been teaching a series of management seminars for a university extension program in northern California. The program ran for five consecutive weekends, each with a Friday evening session and an all-day Saturday session. The same managers attended all sessions.

During the first session I introduced a self-assessment questionnaire I had drafted to attempt to profile behaviors that contributed to alienation, conflict and animosity, in contrast to behaviors that led to empathy,

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A careful review of social science research findings, ranging from Gardner and Goleman to Dale Carnegie, suggests five key dimensions of SI:

1. **Situational Radar.** This is the ability to read situations, understand the social context that influences behavior, and choose behavioral strategies that are most likely to be successful.

2. **Presence.** Also known as bearing, presence is the external sense of self that others perceive: confidence, self-respect and self-worth.

3. **Authenticity.** The opposite of being phony, authenticity is a way of behaving which engenders a perception that one is honest with oneself as well as others.

4. **Clarity.** This is the ability to express oneself clearly, use language effectively, explain concepts clearly and persuade with ideas.

5. **Empathy.** More than just an internal sense of relatedness or appreciation for the experiences of others, empathy in this context represents the ability to create a sense of connectedness with others, to get them on your wavelength and invite them to move with and toward you rather than away and against you.

If you like acronyms, you may find that the initials of these five factors—SPACE—form a useful construct: The ability to understand the social space and navigate effectively within it. This SPACE formula suggests the

understanding and cooperation. I used the terms “toxic” and “nourishing” to denote the contrast between the two kinds of behaviors.

Toxic behaviors cause others to feel devalued, inadequate, angry, frustrated or guilty. Nourishing behaviors cause others to feel valued, capable, loved, respected and appreciated. People with high social intelligence, those who are primarily nourishing in their behavior, are magnetic to others. People with low social intelligence, those who are primarily toxic to others, are repellent. Turns out that the old expression about Frank or Susan's magnetic personality is a fairly accurate description.

During the session, the managers filled out the draft questionnaire and scored it. Most of them reported that the profile was personally useful because it gave them a specific set of behaviors to think about.

At the next session one of the managers offered to share an experience he'd had during the intervening week. He said, “I have one particular employee who's very toxic in almost all of his interactions with others. I've been urged to fire him many times. I haven't been able to figure out what to do with him—until now. Last Monday, after our meeting, I invited him to sit down with me and I showed him this questionnaire. I told him that I've been taking a management course, and the

instructor gave me a questionnaire that I thought was kind of interesting. I asked him to read it. I sat there without saying a word while he read the list of toxic and nourishing behaviors. When he got to the bottom, he looked up at me. He said, 'This is me, isn't it? All of the things on the toxic side are the things I've been doing. I never really thought about it this way.'

"I only said one thing to him: 'Maybe it's something you want to consider.'"

"Well, I've never seen someone's behavior change so fast in my whole life. From one day to the next, he

Even Reagan's most devoted associates readily acknowledged the contradiction between his emotional and social personas. Skillful at charming and motivating people both individually and collectively, Reagan was a man whom very few people knew well or connected with on a deeply personal level. His relationships with close family members were generally distant and strained. People who worked closely with him on a daily basis reported that he showed very little interest in them as individuals. One of his biographers reported hearing exactly the same stories

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went from being the complete grouch to being helpful, considerate, and even friendly. His co-workers keep asking me, 'What did you do to him? Did you inject him with something? Did you send him off to therapy? Suddenly he's become Mr. Personality.'"

Many times since that episode I've seen convincing evidence that the biggest single cause of low social intelligence is simple lack of insight. Toxic people are often so preoccupied with their own personal struggles that they simply do not understand the impact they have on others. They need help in seeing themselves as others see them.

SI And EI

Fans of emotional intelligence have long attempted to include interpersonal skills within the conceptual envelope of EI, on the premise that an individual's interior experience forms the basis for his or her interactions. This seems to be only partly true, however. Now that we recognize social intelligence as a separate dimension of competence, the relationship between EI and SI is becoming clearer.

Case in point: Ronald Reagan, particularly while he was president, engendered an unusual degree of affection in the hearts of many Americans and even people in other countries. After he left office and his health declined, the sense of affection many felt toward him only grew. After his death, his funeral and surrounding ceremonies were accompanied by a remarkable outpouring of admiration; most of the American media presented him as a lovable father figure and compassionate leader. Those who disagreed with his politics observed with amazement as he was elevated to the stature of heroic leader.

many times, told in exactly the same way—the same words, the voice cadence, the pauses, the gestures and facial expressions.

Based on these observations, it seems reasonable to characterize Reagan as a man of remarkably high social intelligence, at least by any reasonable behavioral definition, and distinctly low emotional intelligence. Clearly, while EI and SI are closely interwoven, they do not seem to be the same thing.

All adults, in their careers and personal lives, need to be able to present themselves effectively and earn the respect of the people with whom they interact. SI should become a developmental priority in early education, public schooling, adult education, and employer-sponsored learning. Children and teenagers need to learn to win the fellowship and respect they crave. College students need to learn to collaborate and influence others effectively. Managers need to understand and connect with the people they're appointed to lead. High-tech professionals need to understand social context and achieve their objectives by working from empathy.

Social intelligence can reduce conflict, create collaboration, replace bigotry and polarization with understanding, and mobilize people toward common goals. Indeed, it may be the most important ingredient in our survival as a species. ■

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