

4-2019

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Leah, "The Need for Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace" (2019). *Senior Projects*. 10.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_seniorprojects/10

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The Need for Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

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Abstract

This thesis explores why emotional intelligence is valuable in the workplace, arguing it helps to create positive employee morale. As our society becomes more diverse, so does the environment of the workplace. These developments place increased demands on employees, requiring skills of social and emotional intelligence to function in newly dynamic work environments. Findings and recommendations emerge from an analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, literature reviews, books, and case studies from the fields of business and psychology. Results verify that emotional intelligence is beneficial in the workplace due to increased workplace demands, employee morale, and informational diversity. This analysis also suggests that transformational leadership practices can help foster emotional intelligence. Given these findings, suggestions for future application are also noted.

Introduction

Have you ever worked in an environment where the employees were unable to get along because they could not understand their coworkers' point of view? Was leadership incapable of handling these situations and underqualified to provide effective solutions or resources for a better culture? Did a lack of support and miscommunication impact employee morale, ultimately causing employees to leave their jobs? If these scenarios sound familiar to you, you are not alone. Nearly 70% of employees are disengaged, with 53% of them being unhappy at work (Sturt & Nordstrom, 2018). In addition, 58% of managers (Sturt & Nordstrom, 2018), the people who we look to for direction and example, were never taught how to lead. Being presented with these statistics, it is evident there are underlying issues within organizations. But what are they?

Since I have also worked in a culture similar to the environment noted above, I reflected on my own work experience. The morale in my department was poor, as most of the employees were unable to get along due to personality differences, as well as the backgrounds they came from that contributed to them. As a supervisor, I had the benefit of receiving DiSC training. I found this material to be of great significance in understanding my department, but I was not given the opportunity to extend it to my employees. Without the support from upper management to provide me with tools to educate and coach my employees, the culture remained stressful and I left my job. At this point, I decided to take a break from the private sector, and I returned to school.

As I began my educational journey, I learned about diverse social and cultural differences, such as socioeconomic status and structural inequalities that affect minorities. These factors largely determine an individual's chances of social mobility and educational attainment (Mantsios, 2013, p. 391). Once I gained a broader understanding of these social issues, I recalled

my prior work environment. Only then was I able to contextualize these differences as being attributed to my departments' lack of resources and inexperience with social and emotional intelligence. Having taken my professional and academic experiences into account, I believed there was more to be discovered on this topic, which prompted my ambition to explore why there is a need for social and emotional intelligence in the workplace.

Interdisciplinary Research Method

In order to find solutions to these problems, I analyzed research from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, literature reviews, case studies, and articles to support my research. My sources came from the psychological and business disciplines; however, many of the business authors cited psychological sources to put together their scholarly pieces. Analysis of these sources were consistent in showing how a lack of emotional intelligence can negatively impact employees, leaders, teams, and entire organizations by experiencing poor employee morale, inability to effectively communicate, and high employee turnover. My analysis also demonstrated the positive effects promoting emotional intelligence has on employee morale and collaboration in organizational settings.

Given my own experiences with workplace culture and my education in the Accelerated Leadership Program, I have come to the conclusion that emotional intelligence skills are needed for the benefit of all employees and organizations. My education has caused me to assume that enhanced self-awareness and perspective on diverse groups of people would be appreciated by employees, as they would value establishing civil relationships with coworkers for a healthy work environment. I am also inclined to believe investing resources in developing EI skills in the workplace would be a valuable and worthwhile endeavor. The literature review and analysis

of the findings are influenced by my experiences with these issues and my desire to reduce the negative impacts a lack of emotional intelligence often creates in the workplace.

Analysis of Findings

Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as “one’s ability to manage and monitor one’s own emotions; recognize different types of emotions in others; distinguish the difference between one’s emotions and those of others; and possess the ability to direct information towards one’s decision-making actions” (Pinos, Twigg, Parayitam, & Olson, 2013). In other words, these skills provide the components an individual requires to effectively communicate and socialize with other people. Although EI is an important skill in all social aspects of an individual’s life, it is particularly crucial in the workplace. It influences an employee’s ability or inability to perform their job by managing their emotions and recognizing the same in their coworkers. Having this social awareness affects a person’s capacity to manage workplace demands, attain positive employee morale, and take part in information elaboration.

My research, which draws from the psychological and business disciplines, explains the benefits of practicing emotional intelligence in the professional world and the effect it has on increasing workplace demands, informational diversity, and employee morale. The analysis also synthesized previous studies and their methodologies, such as common methods variance (CMV), to provide insight on why emotional intelligence isn’t practiced more despite reports of its effectiveness. In addition, insight is provided explaining how EI can be established into workplace culture through transformational leadership.

Why Emotional Intelligence?

The topic of emotional intelligence in the workplace is important because it enables employees to meet the demands of the culture, embrace diversity, and exchange perspectives for collaboration. According to Clark & Polesello (2017), “the composition of the workforce is changing...these changes require a new skill set (from individuals and organizations) – skills that enable leaders, individuals, and organizations to leverage this increased diversity to establish a competitive advantage by harnessing the talents of diverse individuals toward the achievement of organizational goals” (p. 337). Social class, politics, educational attainment, workplace hierarchy, religion, race, ethnicity, etc., are characteristics that account for the types of individuals that make up the present culture. These social dynamics alter the environment of the workplace, creating the need for employees to grasp social and emotional intelligence skills to adapt to diversity. If people are unable to get past their differences and understand one another, they become disconnected. The result is a series of side effects that negatively influence individual disposition, employee morale, and organizational effectiveness. Through my research, I have found that emotional intelligence affects both the environment and employees within an organization in areas such as workplace demands and information elaboration, and employee morale.

Workplace Demands & Information Elaboration

The modern workplace has become a dynamic environment that places increased demands on its employees. “Changes such as globalization, increased immigration, and technological change has resulted in increased diversity in organizations” (Clark & Polesello, 2017). In addition, Singh (2008) states, “as the pace of change is increasing and the world of work is making ever greater demands on a person’s cognitive, emotional and physical resources,

this particular set of abilities [social skills] is becoming increasingly important” (p. 293). For example, Thi Lam & Kirby (2002) performed a study to investigate whether emotional intelligence would account for increases in individual cognitive-based performance over and above the level attributable to traditional general intelligence. The study consisted of 304 university undergraduates who completed the short version of the MEIS (Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale) to assess emotional reasoning ability, the Shipley Institute of Living IQ Scale to measure general intelligence, and a questionnaire assessing demographic characteristics. They discovered that overall emotional intelligence contributed to individual cognitive-based performance over and above the level attributable to general intelligence. These findings lead to the topic of informational elaboration since employees require the combination of EI and cognitive abilities to be effective in this collaborative process.

Information elaboration is “the exchange of information on perspectives, the process of feeding back the results of this individual-level processing into the group, and discussion and integration of its implications” (Wang, 2015). Emotional intelligence makes elaboration possible since it allows employees to read each other’s expressions and gestures, as well as be open to the exchange of ideas and diverse perspectives. Therefore, EI enables teams to synthesize their perspectives collaboratively.

Wang (2015) explored the theory that emotional intelligence increases the ability of team members to engage in elaboration, which leads to better performance when teams are informationally diverse. The study consisted of 141 students from a university and they were given the MSCEIT (Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test). The results concluded that EI is positively related to performance in informationally diverse teams, allowing for deep and meaningful conversations.

When integrating diversity, emotional intelligence, and cognitive thinking, employees have the capacity to bring different views, perspectives, and experiences to the table that allow for collaboration and innovation. “We see the world through a set of unique lenses that bring together who we are, where we come from, and our vast experiences. Our lenses certainly include factors like age, race, ethnicity, ability, and spiritual beliefs, but we also have other lenses that shape how we see the world including our knowledge, insights, and experience” (Brown, 2018, p. 143). These attributes form a powerful combination for both employees and employers. Employees empathize with their coworkers by associating themselves with each other’s experiences. They acquire different points of view, which supports learning, personal growth, and trust. Building on these connections, organizations benefit in terms of productivity and profit through the results of the collaborative and innovative efforts of their employees.

Employee Morale

Emotional intelligence in the workplace has favorable influences on employee morale in areas of performance, retention, and occupational stress. Organizations then reap the rewards from these benefits by experiencing increased sales and decreased profit loss (Khalili, 2012). For example, Zelinski (2019) reported that Westminster Tool, a manufacturing company, completely changed its business model by incorporating emotional intelligence into its culture. Due to these changes, there is no longer a skilled-labor shortage, the shop has increased profits, and employee productivity increased by 60%.

In a study conducted by Nikolau & Tsaousis (2002) on occupational stress, they looked to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and sources of occupational pressures. The 211 participants were mental health professionals who were screened using the EIQ (Emotional Intelligence Quotient) and the ASSET (Organizational Stress Screening Tool). The

results showed a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and stress at work. This indicates that those who scored high in overall emotional intelligence suffered less stress at work than those who score low.

A job is defined as “something that has to be done” or “a specific duty, role, or function” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). A career is defined as “a field for or pursuit of consecutive progressive achievement especially in public, professional, or business life” or “a profession for which one trains and which is undertaken as a permanent calling” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). When organizations support a culture that fosters emotional intelligence, they are creating an environment in which employees feel “safe, seen, heard, and respected” (Brown, 2019, p.12) while at work. Jobs turn into careers when employees work in a healthy environment where they receive encouragement and stability paired with opportunities to contribute and professionally grow. Collectively, these studies show that success between employer and employee is symbiotic, as one can only thrive with the support and success from the other.

While there are clear reasons for fostering EI in the workplace, including the demands of the modern workforce, fostering information sharing, and increasing morale, there are various reasons why many employers have not adopted this culture. These theories are explored next.

Why isn't emotional intelligence practiced more in the workplace?

Prior to my research, I questioned why emotional intelligence wasn't utilized by organizations if it is said to be helpful and effective in the workplace. After reviewing my sources, I made a few discoveries on why this is the case. One, emotional intelligence is a new, complex concept that isn't completely understood. Like any emerging topic, it is still being scrutinized and tested. This leads to the second drawback, methodology. Although the literature

pointed to the positive effects of emotional intelligence, they mentioned these results were achieved through unreliable measures. And three, vulnerability. People have difficulty exposing their feelings and true selves to others. This prevents the possibility of connection with those around us, further limiting the benefits of EI.

Methodology

Since emotional intelligence is an emergent topic, researchers are still investigating the best method to measure its effectiveness. In the studies that have been conducted thus far, they have questioned the validity of the positive correlations between emotional intelligence and employee morale due to common method variance (CMV). Lindebaum & Cartwright (2010) and Clark & Polesello (2017) state that most measures of emotional intelligence are self-assessments and these tests can prove to be unreliable because they lack objectivity. Individuals rate themselves according to their own self-perceptions, which may not be accurate. According to Polychroniou (2009), other studies have “reported that unsuccessful supervisors overestimate their skills compared to successful supervisors...under-estimators of their managerial skills are likely to be more effective than over-estimators”. In addition, Lindebaum & Cartwright (2010) bring up similar concerns regarding valid reporting in studies that measure the relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership through common methods variance. “Possible causes of CMV concern the collection of the predictor and criterion variables from the same source at the same time using the same measurement technique” (Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010).

Vulnerability

According to Brown (2018), we live in scarcity, a feeling that we're never enough (p. 14). This feeling of inadequacy causes people to "armor up" (Brown, 2018, p. 12) and prevents them from embracing fear to expose their vulnerabilities. This behavior causes people to avoid tough conversations, keep bold ideas to themselves, shame and blame, opt out of conversations about diversity and inclusivity, create unsustainable solutions, and diminish trust caused by lack of connection and empathy (Brown, 2018, pp. 7-9). Barriers such as these prevent any type of connection between individuals, including the capacity for emotional intelligence to exist in the workplace.

Through the analysis of these studies, I have discovered that although methodologies may be called into question, there is genuine interest in the validity of emotional intelligence. Researchers continue to analyze the social and psychological effects of this concept in the workplace, and as the above study has shown, this is a subject worth investigating for the sake of employee social and emotional health. Operating in a state of disconnection takes a toll on an individual's wellbeing since "we are physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hardwired for connection, love and belonging (Brown, 2018, p. 126). This proves emotional intelligence to be complex since it affects the whole person. Having acquired this insight, I recalled my prior work environment and realized this was *my* experience. I remember feeling these emotions, wanting better, and needing change. In combining this knowledge, my past, and newfound awareness, I found it necessary to explore the methods used to incorporate emotional intelligence into the workplace. This concept is introduced next.

How to practice emotional intelligence in the workplace?

Throughout my research, I discovered the most common recommendation for altering workplace culture to reflect one of emotionally intelligent employees is for an organization to invest in its people. Hiring and/or investing in education for transformational leaders is suggested. In addition, leaders should demonstrate the “Four I’s of Transformational Leadership” which are specific qualities and behaviors they must exhibit to empower employees to develop emotional intelligence, as well as foster this culture in the workplace.

A transformational leader (TFL) is an individual who is able to demonstrate high EI skills so he/she can recognize the emotional environment of the company, employees, and of his/herself to promote growth, effectiveness, and innovation. These responsibilities can be accomplished by leading by example, promoting the culture, building trust, and providing learning opportunities for employees.

The following sources highlight how a leader can set the tone of the workplace culture, negatively or positively, by displaying emotional intelligence in various settings. Singh (2008) and Ashkanasy & Daus (2002) mention that leaders need high emotional intelligence because they represent the organization to the public, so they should be skilled at perceiving the emotional climate of the organization they are representing. They should also have the ability to perceive the emotional culture of the organization and/or employees to intervene effectively and preventatively.

Polychroniou (2009) performed a study with 267 managers to explore the relationships between EI, its components, (social skills, motivation, empathy) and transformational leadership in organizations. Through interviews, the study focused on supervisor-employee interactions in

teams with the main goal of investigating employees' perceptions regarding their supervisors' EI and TFL skills. The results found that supervisors' emotional intelligence and its components are positively associated with transformational leadership, increasing team effectiveness with employees.

The Four I's of Transformational Leadership

After analyzing the case studies and research, it is clear that transformational leadership is a highly effective way to promote emotional intelligence into a workplace culture since these individuals have the authority to make organizational changes and inspire employees. A transformational leader is expected to "look for potential motives in followers, seek to satisfy higher needs, and engage the full person of the follower" (Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010). With this being the case, Polychroniou (2009), Lindebaum & Cartwright, (2010), and Pinos et. al. (2013) find the social skills entailed in the Four I's of Transformational Leadership necessary to fulfill the role of advocate for employees. The skills are: (1) idealized influence, providing a vision and sense of mission and instilling pride; (2) inspirational motivation, communicating high expectations, often drawing on symbolic messages to provide meaning to their followers' work; (3) intellectual stimulation, concerns the leader's efforts to help followers be creative and innovative by questioning assumptions and prompting them to approach old situations in novel ways; and (4) individualized consideration, by paying close attention to each individual's needs for progression and achievement (Lindebaum & Cartwright).

According to Pinos et. al. (2013), a study of 110 senior-level managers was conducted to measure the relationship between leaders likely to use transformational behaviors and who were high in emotional intelligence using the SUEIT (Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test). The results supported a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and

transformational leadership. In addition, a negative relationship was found between EI and both laissez-faire (hands-off) leaders and transactional (supervisory) leaders because they were found to be less willing to understand their own personalities and those of others.

As I recall my role as a supervisor, I recognized my department had poor morale. The employees were struggling to connect and get along and this affected their ability to work cohesively as a team. Although I made attempts to build trust and rapport with the team, our department had a lack of support from management. They would not authorize professional development for the department despite how essential it was for their success. Since my team wasn't given the resources to be successful, the culture within the department remained the same and everyday was a struggle. Low motivation, conflict, and poor communication were the norm.

This experience has shown me how various approaches to leadership can impact workplace morale and culture. When management digresses from the interest of their employees, they are aware of being disregarded and it is reflected in their performance. This changes the tone of workplace culture and it cannot be left up to employees to drive it into the right direction. Alternatively, my research has shown me the positive side of leadership. Transformational leaders that present their whole selves using high emotional intelligence skills have the capacity to navigate their emotions, as well as the emotions of their employees. Possessing these abilities allows leaders to empower subordinates, build trust, and encourage individual growth naturally to create a positive culture in which employees and organizations can thrive.

Conclusion

Overall, the research supported my thesis in confirming the need for social and emotional intelligence in the workplace. It explained why the components of emotional intelligence: social skills, motivation, and empathy, (Polychroniou, 2009) are beneficial to an individual in their professional lives, as well as to the culture of the organization they are working for. As companies become increasingly diverse, employees cannot solely rely on cognitive abilities, but must be adept in both cognitive skills and EI to innovate and collaborate with coworkers to foster productive workplace environments.

However, it is important to mention that although the success of a company heavily relies on its employees, the studies showed that establishing a culture of emotional intelligence is not the responsibility of the employees, but of the organizations in which they work for. With a diverse set of individuals, differences in personality and backgrounds can be expected to attribute to workplace issues such as poor communication and morale. In these instances, organizations cannot expect their employees to resolve these situations on their own without guidance. Companies can address these issues by investing in their people and this starts with those in leadership positions. These individuals must display qualities that promote teamwork in ways that influence, motivate, stimulate, and consider others (Polychroniou, 2009; Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010; Pinos et. al. 2013). Transformational leaders influence employees by showing they have a vested interest in their individual success. These actions impact employees by building trust, promoting employee opportunity and growth, which ultimately contribute to the success of the company.

While the majority of my research supported emotional intelligence, many of the studies used measures of common method variance, which is known to be questioned due to the use of

same-source methodologies. For this reason, many researchers express reservations concerning the validity of claims that emotional intelligence is needed in the workplace. However, I contest the research demonstrates validity through these measures. If individuals are truly emotionally intelligent, they will present themselves with the capacities to recognize their emotions, the emotions of their coworkers and leadership, and also be able to perceive where EI is lacking. Given these circumstances, these individuals possess the social ability and self-awareness required to perform a self-assessment or survey their leaderships' emotional intelligence skills. These factors would produce test results that accurately gauge the effectiveness of EI.

After I learned about social issues and how they influence various aspects of individuals' lives, it raised my level of awareness on the importance of emotional intelligence. As a consequence, I believe this project is important because social and emotional intelligence is the gateway to understanding one another and our differences, which creates the space to connect, collaborate, and work together cohesively. Having this knowledge is valuable for personal growth and the ability to connect with people, which creates space for personal and professional interactions with others.

In combining my experiences and research findings, I would like to propose that emotional intelligence practices be established in organizations through dissemination of research findings, transformational leadership education, and development of EI within organizations.

Disseminate Research Findings

I would like the opportunity to share my research to raise awareness on the importance of social and emotional intelligence so it can be utilized to help us connect and understand one another. I will share my thesis with the other students in my cohort, the community stakeholders

that work closely with the Accelerated Leadership Program, and my teacher/advisors. If I am afforded the opportunity, I would like to share my project on the Scholar Works website to convey this information with other academics internationally.

Transformational Leadership Education

Before organizations can establish cultures of emotional intelligence, their leaders need to demonstrate competency in EI. I propose that leadership build these skills through networking, seminars, online courses, and research (read books, articles, journal articles, etc.), and most importantly, practice.

Author and research professor Brené Brown has written many books on social skills and emotional intelligence that can be referenced to build leadership skills. In addition, she developed Dare to Lead, a leadership program that can be taken online or in person to develop the skills necessary for leadership and culture change at work.

Development of EI Within Organizations

An organization's culture can be shifted to one of emotional intelligence by managers and supervisors developing open rapport with employees, leading by example, promoting a culture of compassion, having an open-door policy, encouraging and developing growth of each employee as an individual, empathizing, and building trust. Organizations should further promote the idea of an emotionally intelligent culture by incorporating these ideals into their mission statement, company vision, and employee handbooks. Employees should be given the same growth and learning opportunities of seminars, courses, and team-building activities so they can adjust and contribute to the EI culture.

Although I made recommendations to establish change and incorporate emotional intelligence within organizations, I believe it is equally important that we start the process of change within ourselves. By opening our hearts and minds to others, we are creating a space for inclusion, equity, and diversity, allowing us to see a whole person, receive new perspective and gain alliances. Through my educational journey, I've learned that if we take the time to actively listen to someone's story, it becomes harder to judge them and easier to empathize with them. If we know better, we can choose to do better.

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