

Training Emotional Competencies in the Workplace

By Bob Acton, Ph.D.

For some time now, corporate leaders have been aware of the value of management and staff working with good emotion management skills. Utilizing the skills necessary for good management of emotions and concomitant behaviour reactions is not only important for creating a harmonious workplace but actually creates increased profitability within the organization. A more comfortable work environment and a more profitable business...how could you ask for more? No wonder there has been an explosion of interest in concepts such as emotional intelligence popularized in the work by Daniel Goleman (1995).

Having a good emotional skill set makes a difference in job success. In a national insurance company, insurance sales agents who were weak in emotional competencies such as self-confidence, initiative, and empathy sold policies with an average premium of \$54,000. Those who were very strong in at least 5 of 8 key emotional competencies sold policies worth \$114,000 (Hay/McBer Research and Innovation Group, 1997).

Selection of new employees using methods to assess emotional intelligence is also good business practice. In a large beverage firm, using standard methods to hire division presidents, 50% left within two years, mostly because of poor performance. After selecting executives based on emotional competencies such as initiative, self-confidence, and leadership, only 6% left in two years. In addition, the executives selected based on emotional competence were far more likely to perform in the top third based on salary bonuses for performance of the divisions they led: 87% were in the top third. Moreover, division leaders with these competencies outperformed their targets by 15 to 20 percent (McClelland, 1999).

Training in these skills is possible and quite beneficial for organizations. Some studies have indicated that training supervisors in emotional competencies resulted in large reductions in union grievances, lost-time

accidents, and increases in productivity goals. For example, after supervisors in a manufacturing plant received training in emotional competencies lost-time accidents were reduced by 50 percent, formal grievances were reduced from an average of 15 per year to 3 per year, and the plant exceeded productivity goals by \$250,000 (Pesuric & Byham, 1996).

These positive findings associated with the training of emotional competencies are also noted in the personal health of staff. One study reported that after training, 26% of the trainees had reductions in blood pressure, 35% reported reductions in stress symptoms, and 57% felt their productivity had improved significantly (Kinni, 2000)

Smart thinking organizations are implementing training programs to help their staff improve their management of emotions at work. It pays off.

The question is how to best deliver optimum training for management and staff in this area. Traditional classroom teaching methods are not the best method for training skills in emotion management (Cherniss, Goleman & Emmerling, 1998). Such methods of training include having people read material and/or listen to a person speak about a topic. The trouble is that these typical teaching techniques work well to teach topics that require only the use of ideas. Reading about something means one will know about it, but enacting new emotional behaviour requires practice and integration of thought, emotion, and action. Those responsible for training budgets within organizations should watch carefully that they are buying training programs that use methods and techniques well suited to the topic.

For example some corporations are keen to hire inspirational speakers that provide short talks on topics such as emotional intelligence and emotions in the workplace. While these kinds of speakers serve a certain purpose they do not work well to have people develop better skills in emotional competence. What does work well involves a number of important steps in the education process.

These steps involve conducting an analysis at the beginning of the process to understand the needs of the organization and the strengths and weaknesses of the individual. This aspect of quality training results in the development of personal goals for learning that are in line with corporate needs. The process is designed to create accountability in the learning process: personal accountability and organizational accountability.

Once this initial phase is conducted, the training phase is enacted which initially involves gaining an understanding of the concepts of emotional competencies. This is followed by specific skills training that may include areas such as increasing the individual's self- and other-awareness and strategies to manage emotions effectively under stressful conditions. These skills need to be in line of their own personal goals for learning. Experiential learning involving actual practice is critical for adults and particularly important for learning about emotions. Safe feedback is a critical component that needs to be used frequently throughout learning. Making the new skills meaningful in the workplace, using the new skills on the job and having an opportunity to fine tune the new behaviour is very important in solidifying the new learning.

Finally, the process should be evaluated to determine success and this information must be presented back to both the individual and the corporate leaders.

This type of learning makes the process meaningful and improves motivation to achieve. It also serves to reduce training boredom characterized by statements such as “that workshop was just another new thing” or “that won't change anything.” That kind of boredom speaks to training that is not meaningful to the individual. Moreover, it is extremely costly for organizations in person-hours lost, the development of a negative mindset toward learning, and the financial costs of the training process itself. The training of emotional competencies in the workplace is not more costly than other forms of training, but must be done effectively in order to effectively make use of corporate training dollars.

Training in emotional competencies is quite possible but shouldn't be viewed as a panacea for personal challenges of some employees or organizational problems. A problem in training in this area is the skepticism of some that these aspects of personal functioning are either unimportant in professional life or untrainable. This type of skepticism will create barriers for training within any organization. Moreover, peoples' fears about potentially getting "too personal" within this type of training can also create problems for integration within an organization. Training in these skills is valuable and can make a difference for both the individual and the organization but they take time and commitment.

Emotional competence in the workplace is powerful. It makes for better work environments and for better profitability. But make sure that when you decide to hire trainers that they train the best way possible.

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