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Emotionally Intelligent Leader(ship): An Efficient Approach

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Abstract

Recent studies have shown the fact that leaders are often faced with several potential issues of professional adaptation, for example, the difficulty of setting up a team, building good interpersonal relationships, the impossibility to interact efficiently (Caruso & Salovey, 2012, p. 20). The premise of our research is the fact that promoting and building emotionally intelligent leader(ship) is essential for cultivating a comfortable mental climate and team work spirit, as well as for building interpersonal relationships. The purpose of this research is twofold: to present the concept of emotional intelligence by highlighting its defining dimensions and applicative nature, respectively to evaluate its level of development at leaders. The ability to interact efficiently, cultivating a healthy environment, stimulating trust and a responsible conduct constitute a real challenge for a leader. To be successful, a leader should constantly replenish his leadership skills through an efficient use of emotional intelligence. In this case, “know thyself!” gains a special signification: that of knowing the others for the benefit of the entire team.

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1. Main text

The literature defines emotional intelligence in relation to four basic components, respectively self-knowledge, self-control, social conscience and relationship management (Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee, 2007, pp. 60-61). Self-knowledge means being aware of one’s own emotions and their impact, one’s own strengths and limitations, the accurate appreciation of personal values and skills, the disposition to reflect and meditate upon one’s own actions. A leader with a good level of self-knowledge is aware of his own feelings and the way in which these may influence professional performances, and constantly cultivates the habit of reflecting upon his own acts in professional life.

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also, instead of reacting impulsively.

Self-control implies emotional self-control, adopting positive emotions to the detriment of negative ones, flexibility in adapting to changing situations and the possibility to overcome obstacles. Preserving optimism and a good mood even under stress enables the building of a climate of trust, comfort and security. For a leader, self-control becomes the major challenge.

One of its most important responsibilities is controlling one’s moods, expressing positive emotions fully and managing negative ones appropriately. A leader’s emotional state is extremely contagious at the level of the group, a reason for which emotional control should constitute a reference point. A leader dominated by negative emotions, such as frustration, anxiety or panic, will not be able to build a proper work environment, as his mood would reflect upon the group he is leading.

The third component of emotional intelligence is related to social conscience. This implies the ability to perceive the others’ emotions and harmonize them with his own, so that emotional states may converge. Inside an organization, social conscience becomes the leader’s main responsibility, which is that of creating resonance. Empathy – the fundamental skill of social conscience – enables a leader to seize the others’ feelings and views, identify the shared values and priorities which may guide the group and generate positive reactions inside the group. A leader with no empathy will send, without realizing it, discordant messages through a behaviour which will generate negative reactions. In such situations, empathy turns into the sine qua non element of efficient social interactions in professional life.

The last but not the least element of emotional intelligence, is represented by relationship management. This implies relational management, mobilizing others towards a new direction, team spirit and collaboration. For a leader, this skill is of major importance since building and maintaining relationships is absolutely compulsory for the progress of the organization.

The four elements of emotional intelligence are interconnected and mutually conditioned. The dynamic relationship established between them is theoretically and practically relevant. Self-knowledge facilitates both empathy and self-control which, in their turn, determine a good relationship management. They constitute the basic ingredients of an emotionally intelligent leader(ship). A leader with emotional intelligence integrates all these elements in his own leading style, in order to constantly improve his leading skills. A study conducted on 400 executives revealed the fact that, first of all, they resort to self-knowledge and empathy to monitor their own acts as well as the others’ reactions to their actions, accept critiques, take feedback into consideration and are not afraid of potential negative reactions. Unlike these, less efficient leaders are constantly waiting for appreciative feedback, which makes them simply lose the sense of reality, often having less correct views regarding their leading performances. The self-evaluations of the most efficient leaders were very similar to how other people evaluated them (Ashford & Tsui, 1991, pp. 251-280).

Values play an important role in discovering the self. A person’s life philosophy represents the system of values which guides and possibly indicates the leading style of that person. What makes the difference is the way in which people relate to their own values, respectively the degree of correspondence between these and their actions. Such differences may reflect different life philosophies, the most frequent ones being the pragmatic, intellectual and humanistic ones. The questionnaire of philosophical orientation measures the relative predominance of each of the three life philosophies, the missing link between values and behaviour. Thus, the central theme of a pragmatic philosophy is the belief that usefulness determines the value of an idea, person or organization; the individualist orientation makes its “followers” adopt a promoting style, to the detriment of the democratic or collegial style. The central theme of an intellectual philosophy evaluates the value of a thing according to a code or set of principles related to reason; those who adopt this perspective focus on cognitive skills, eliminating social skills almost entirely and may adopt a visionary leading style, if the vision describes a rationally founded future. Unlike these, the central theme of a humanistic philosophy is the belief that personal relationships are those which give meaning to life; whereas pragmatic philosophy may lead to “sacrificing the few for the many”, the humanistic leader cultivates the skills related to social conscience and relationship management, adopting a democratic or collegial style (Boyatzis, Murphy & Wheeler, 2000, pp. 47-64).

This life philosophy which stimulates human values coincides with the point of view we have expressed in the introduction, namely that promoting and building emotionally intelligent leader(ship) is essential for cultivating a comfortable mental climate and team spirit, and for developing interpersonal relationships.
1. Methods

To assess the level of emotional intelligence, we conducted an extensive field research during April-June 2012, involving several institutions and organizations from the county of Bacău, respectively: The General Directorate of Public Finances Bacău, The Department of Agriculture, The General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection, The Territorial Work Inspectorate, The Environmental Protection Agency, The County Agency for Employment, The Pension Department, The County Council, The County Hospital, The County Directorate for Sports and Youth. The case study involved a questionnaire applied to 15 persons who responded affirmatively to our request and who are working in top management or human resources departments. The sample is predominated by the masculine segment, which contains 10 persons, the feminine segment being represented by 5 persons.

The questionnaire contains a set of 10 questions, consisting of presentations of possible scenarios in which a person may find himself. The questions contain four answer alternatives and are built around certain items which are related to the main dimensions of emotional intelligence (Roco, 2004, pp. 187-189): self-knowledge of one’s own emotions, knowledge of the emotions of others, personal motivation, optimism, changing prejudices regarding ethnic diversity, control of negative emotions and a person’s empathetic skills, management of conflicting situations, cultivating a comfortable psychic climate, involving persons in new situations, stimulating and developing personal skills. Certain features of emotional intelligence are also covered, for example perseverance, empathy or a person’s level of optimism.

2. Results and discussions

Following the counting of answers and the corresponding points (-100 p/below average level; 100-150 p./average level; more than 150 p./above average level), the obtained results show that only 40% of the respondents display an average level of emotional intelligence, whereas 60% of them have a below average level. The items with the most relevant scores are related to the self-knowledge of one’s own emotions, knowledge of the emotions of others, personal motivation, changing prejudices concerning ethnic diversity and adopting a democratic way of relating, getting involved in new situations (more than 65%), whereas the items related to the control of negative emotions, optimism, managing conflicting situations, cultivating a comfortable mental climate or developing personal skills obtained quite low scores (below 35%). Although the values regarding the development level of emotional intelligence are relatively small in relation to the maximum, the fact that most of the respondents are also oriented towards knowing the others emotionally is a positive fact. In fact, the research conducted indicates a connection between the capacity to be aware of one’s own emotions and the capacity to understand the emotions of others, respectively the ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships. The results obtained show the fact that the interpersonal relationship is correlated with sensitivity towards others, the desire to establish and maintain relationships, respectively positive expectations regarding interpersonal behaviour (Bar-On, 2000, pp. 363-385).

Although in our case the masculine segment constituted the majority in terms of number, women obtained the best results, revealing a higher level of emotional intelligence. These data coincide with those provided by the literature, which show that women have a small advantage concerning skills related to emotional intelligence (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 1999, pp. 267-298). Nevertheless, when speaking about a leader’s behaviour, women are clearly disadvantaged, although they may be efficient leaders. What is usually acceptable for a male executive is not always regarded as suitable for a woman in a leading position, as our society has subtle norms regarding this chapter. For example, it is perfectly acceptable for a man to be vehement and forthright, but not for a woman, whose masculine behaviour may be perceived in an entirely different way. A woman manager expressing joy is labelled as having a typically feminine conduct, whereas a man with the same behaviour will enjoy the appreciation of his colleagues (Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992, pp. 3-22).

The results obtained show that, generally, emotional intelligence plays a secondary role on the level of leadership, its development stage being below average, which suggests the need for training in this respect. The directions of action aim at developing (inter)personal skills such as empathy, optimism, the (self)control of negative emotions, management of conflicting situations, creating positive interactions, cultivating a comfortable mental climate which may enable the expression of personal ideas in a natural, relaxed and creative way, features that enhance emotional intelligence. The studies conducted inside organizations suggest that for the leading positions, approximately 80% of the competences needed for success are of an emotional and social nature, the most
frequently mentioned ones being interpersonal skills, empathy, positive interaction and cooperation with others (Goleman, 1998, pp. 281-296). The distinguishing feature of leaders is their optimism and confidence in their peers, as well as the attention paid to empathy and respect (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 166).

Future Directions of Research. This study is restrictive, because we have assessed the level of emotional intelligence only on a limited number of subjects, who responded to our request, which delimitates our findings from this perspective. However, although the sample is small, the results obtained open new directions of actions and launch new challenges for future research. Firstly, the research should involve a higher number of institutions and organizations, respectively a gendered comparative analysis on an exclusively male executives sample and an exclusively female executives one, inside which there should be studied the possible associations or predictions between emotional intelligence and other correlated factors such as professional success, self-motivation and work performances (for example, the literature mentions the existence of certain correlations between emotional intelligence, motivation and performance, Miron & McClelland, 1979, pp. 13-28).

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The human capital should represent a leader’s main responsibility. The ability to interact efficiently, build a healthy environment, stimulate trust and a responsible behaviour constitutes a real challenge. In order to be successful, a leader should constantly renew his leadership skills by integrating emotional intelligence into his leadership style and using it efficiently. In our view, promoting and developing emotionally intelligent leader(ship) is essential for cultivating a comfortable mental climate and team spirit, as well as for building interpersonal relationships. In this respect, organizing training sessions or workshops for building leadership skills, interpersonal and professional competences may be a good example of emotional intelligence in action.

The research on organizational institutions has revealed the fact that on an individual, group or organizational level, emotional intelligence converges into the exercise of leadership, since a leader’s emotional intelligence may generate a decisive impact upon the group’s climate and efficiency which, in its turn, may affect, in a similar way, the leader. An emotionally intelligent leader has the ability to manage appropriately these influences in order to reduce to the minimum the negative consequences that may affect the group or organization’s emotional functioning (Kelner, Rivers & O’Connell, 1994). In this way, the leader’s emotional intelligence may be transferred to the group, eventually turning into the stage of organizational emotional intelligence maturity.

The courses of managerial training focused on developing emotional and interpersonal competences should constitute a requirement at the level of an organization. Such an example may be the program for developing the relational skills of middle supervisors and managers from Pennsylvania, which consisted in organizing weekly meetings, structured in several stages. The first stage of the program focused on discussions about leaders, competences and leading styles. The second stage involved evaluations according to a managerial grid, respectively evaluations regarding the leading style, taking decisions or listening exercises and interviews. The last stage implied an evaluation of the program, which showed that the managers became more aware of their emotions and motivations, more sensitive to the needs of others and more trustworthy (Cherniss, 2000, pp. 433-458).

For many organizations, selecting employees on the criterion of emotional intelligence has become a standard procedure. Several studies have shown the fact that selecting employees based on this criterion clearly leads to better results compared to traditional methods. Such an example is the selection program adopted by l'Oréal to hire sales agents, which uses the method of the behavioural interview for key-events. This consists in describing certain situations from work which generated positive outcomes, respectively situations in which the outcomes were negative. The data reveal the fact that on an annual level, the sales agents selected on this criterion had much higher sales levels than sales agents recruited through the company’s old selection procedure (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, pp. 237-239).

The selection based on the criterion of emotional intelligence recorded positive results also when used for higher management positions. Inside a multinational company, the annual turnover rate for managers was 25%, which generated significant financial losses for the company. Following the selection based on emotional and social skills, the rate fell considerably, which meant a significant reduction of costs (McClelland, 1999, pp. 331-339).

At the level of the team, the leader’s emotional intelligence generates the ability to manage emotions in a way
which cultivates trust, identity and group efficacy, thus maximizing cooperation, collaboration and efficiency at the level of the organization (Druskat & Wolff, 2001, pp. 81-90). In light of these perspectives, we hope that the observations we have formulated may constitute new directions of action for what could mean, inside an organization, *emotionally intelligent leader(ship)*.

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