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Contents

- 1 Editorial
Jan Bogg
- 2 Similar or different? Strategic decision makers' personality traits across organisation types: A case study
Gail Steptoe-Warren, Douglas Howat & I. Hume
- 6 Adverse impact and cognitive ability tests... or systematic discrimination endorsed by psychologists
Nic Hammarling
- 9 Competence in personality testing and the online Register of Qualifications in Test Use (RQTU): A PTC response
- 11 Assessment for top management
Clive Fletcher
- 14 Reader's response to Stephanie Jones
Catherine Stohart
- 15 Emotional intelligence: Extravagant hype or a damaging folly?
Andrew Munro
- 15 News from the Psychological Testing Centre
- 18 Factor analysis of the Jefferson Scale of Physical Empathy, student version
Julie Prescott, Sarah Wilson & Gordon Becket
- 23 From the Journals to Your Practice
Jan Bogg
- 24 Using Lego to help children with high functioning autism spectrum disorders
Gina Gomez de la Cuesta
- 26 The developing role of the SENCo during times of great change:
A personal perspective
Gareth D. Morewood
- 29 2012 conferences and training events
Jo Horne & Ian Bogg
- 31 The implications for practitioners of a developmentally appropriate and play-based early years curriculum: The Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project
Liz Sproule
- 33 The European Qualification in Occupational Test Use (Level 2)

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Emotional intelligence: Extravagant hype or a damaging folly?

Andrew Munro

WHEN Daniel Goleman declared in 1995 that ‘80 per cent of success is based on your emotional intelligence’, many were sceptical. Psychometricians doubted that ‘emotional intelligence’ was much more than an alternative vocabulary to articulate constructs well-mapped out in existing models of personality. These reservations, however, had little impact. The EQ enterprise established itself rapidly as a major force in the assessment and development of a generation of emerging professionals, managers and leaders.

With over 15 years’ research, several meta-analyses of the evidence base and scholarly summary, this article asks if Goleman was correct in his prediction that emotional intelligence would be ‘increasingly applied in choosing who will be hired and who will not, who will be let go and who retained, who passed over and who promoted’.

Was this a good thing in improving the calibre of leadership that builds resilient organisations? Or did EQ catalyse a shift in emphasis about the causes and consequences of leadership that had damaging business consequences?

The problems with EQ

Whatever its potential virtues in supporting leadership development, Emotional Intelligence faces a number of significant challenges within assessment.

1. Those who report high levels of EQ probably have low levels of emotional maturity.

Although performance measures such as the MSCEIT attempted an objective assessment of emotional capability, for the most part the field has been dominated by self-report questionnaires. Fakeability has long been the Achilles’ heel of personality measures. For EQ measures, the problem is compounded. ‘If 80 per cent of people believe they are among the top 50 per cent most emotionally intelligent people’ (Brackett et al., 2006) and a key component of EQ is self awareness, the first question is: *how do those of low emotional intelligence conclude they are not emotionally intelligent?*

Or, re-framed in the context of leadership assessment, are leadership candidates with the integrity to respond with honesty out-manoeuvred by one of two sets of rivals, those with impression management skills to manipulate their responses, or with the self deception that is characteristic of low emotional maturity?

2. The failure of EQ measures to do what they say on the tin.

The claim was ambitious: to identify those qualities that conventional measures of IQ and personality had neglected. The second question for EQ was: do its different measures out-perform existing assessment methods? As it turns out, despite a few cherry-picked findings, the predictive track record of the proliferation of EQ measures has been dismal.

Antonakis et al. (2009) summarise: ‘I have yet to find one study that has followed the accepted guidelines and has shown that EI matters for leadership effectiveness.’ A combination of general cognitive aptitude and conventional measures of Big Five

personality traits seem to account for any limited predictive power of EQ measures, either in self report or 360 feedback formats.

Christiansen (2010) looked at EQ in a selection scenario and argues that: ‘measures of EI, even performance based measures, offer very little additional information about applicants when measures of cognitive ability and personality are already used in the selection process.’

3. Emotional intelligence suggests but then neglects a key theme of leadership.

When Goleman said ‘there is an old fashioned word for EI, it’s character’ he was fundamentally wrong. Here we move to the third problem with EQ. Character implies a combination of integrity, trust, courage, resilience and authenticity. But EQ metrics don’t seem all that well placed to identify those key themes of leadership life. As Cote (2011) points out ‘emotional intelligence is not character. It’s like any set of skills that we have that can be used to promote moral goals or selfish goals.’

The ‘intelligences’ of emotional awareness and self regulation can as easily be deployed by the Machiavellian operator as the authentic leader. Indeed, Waterhouse (2006) was even more direct: ‘Nothing in any EI construct precludes someone with high EI from being an immoral person.’ And rather than putting character on the leadership agenda, Kristjansson (2006) concludes: ‘EQ lacks moral depth.’

4. EQ became an escape route for executives and leaders who didn’t know what they were doing.

Locke (2005) argues: ‘Leadership is not primarily about making people feel good. It’s about knowing what you are doing and knowing what to do.’ Executives, out of their depth in addressing the complexity and uncertainty of the challenges they faced, saw EQ as a convenient compensatory tactic to get them out of strategic jail. This is a leadership emphasis on the short-term feel good factor rather than an outlook of business honesty and professional know-how to tackle the difficult challenges organisations face.

No one wants immature leaders, or leaders lacking the social skills to address the interpersonal and political sensitivities of organisational life. It is obvious that we should recruit, promote and build our succession processes around a leadership model that factors in a mindset and skill set of emotional maturity and social wisdom. But the question remains: Why, given the enormous investment in the EQ enterprise, have we not witnessed a leadership renaissance evident in rising levels of employee trust, robust talent pipelines and succession coverage?

Maybe we got caught up in the hype of Goleman’s ‘missing 80 per cent’ that promised a new generation of leadership and leaders with the emotional maturity and wisdom to guide their organisations through change. Instead we found ourselves appointing leaders more skilled in manipulation and self-presentation, while their professional and managerial counterparts of genuine character and wisdom were sidelined as too difficult and awkward.

EQ has at best been little more than a distraction to improvements in leadership assessment and development. At worst, however, it has contributed to a dynamic of leadership folly and fiasco that has damaged business productivity and competitiveness.

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