

Emotional and interpersonal competencies and leader development

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Abstract

A variety of recent leader development programs have focused on improving leaders' emotional and interpersonal competencies. Decades of leadership research suggest that these "people skills" are crucial for leader effectiveness. This paper reviews the history of these leader development programs as well as research on emotional and interpersonal competencies. Suggestions for grounding leader development programs in sound research on emotional and social competencies, as well as an agenda for future research on the development of leader emotional and interpersonal skills, are provided.

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1. Introduction

The recent explosion of interest in emotional intelligence and emotions in the workplace has led to a number of popular interventions to develop leaders' "emotional competencies." This paper reviews both this new research on the role of emotions in leader development, and traces its historical roots in basic research on emotional processes and emotional and interpersonal communication. The intent is to provide direction to human resources professionals for research and practice on developing leader emotional and interpersonal skills.

All too often, in the context of reviewing leader competencies for developmental purposes, managers and other leaders are told that they need to improve their "people skills." What this usually means is that these individuals are having difficulties in the interpersonal aspects of their relationships with supervisees, peers, and perhaps even with superiors. In some cases, it means that the leader is not engaging in enough interpersonal communication to maintain effective work relationships. In other instances, there may be problems at the emotional level — appearing distant and aloof and not "connecting" emotionally with others, or alternatively, engaging in outbursts of negative emotions. The result is that the leader is targeted for development of interpersonal skills, or in more recent years and parlance, told to improve one's "emotional intelligence (EI)," or "EQ" as opposed to "IQ."

While a number of leader development programs do focus on improving the interpersonal skills, emotional skills, and general communication abilities of executives, managers, and other types of leaders, there are no agreed-upon models. Indeed, it has been argued that leadership development generally suffers from a lack of theories to guide

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interventions (Day, 2000; Day & O'Connor, 2003). As such, the purpose of this article is to review existing leadership development programs intended to improve leader emotional and interpersonal competencies and the research regarding the effectiveness of these programs. Particular attention will be given to the theoretical and empirical roots of these programs. Finally, drawing on research across a wide range of disciplines, directions for developing well-grounded programs to enhance leader emotional and interpersonal skills will be suggested.

2. Developing emotional and interpersonal competencies: existing programs

A search of leadership development programs offered by independent consulting groups will yield hundreds that involve developing leader emotional or interpersonal competencies, many of the former offer training in emotional intelligence, while programs aimed at building interpersonal competencies tend to focus on improving interpersonal relationships, particularly with supervisees and peer team members. On the other hand, it is important to note that top-ranked business schools do not typically offer training in emotional competencies or emotional intelligence as part of their regular executive leadership development programs (presumably because it is still viewed as a new, “faddish” approach), although some do offer programs in building interpersonal relationships. Of the top 20 business school (reported in U.S. News and World Report’s 2007 Top Business schools); only one school offered an emotional intelligence component in their executive leadership development programs.

An important question concerns the theoretical models and research bases for developing these types of leader competencies. In many cases, programs designed to improve leader interpersonal skills are not based on any particular theory or body of research. Programs aimed at developing leader emotional competencies are typically based on one of the very new models of emotional intelligence, and these will be reviewed shortly. It is important to note, however, that the emotional intelligence models are themselves very new, with the term “emotional intelligence” only entering the research literature in 1990 (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). As a result, the development of emotional and interpersonal leader competencies is still a very new area — one that will benefit by drawing on existing research and theory from a wide range of social science disciplines.

3. Programs to develop leader interpersonal skills

Programs intended to develop interpersonal skills date back to Dale Carnegie’s (1926, 1936) guidebooks for businesspersons and the general public on *How to Win Friends and Influence People* — programs that continue to this day (www.dalecarnegie.com). Like many of the programs intended to develop managerial and leader interpersonal competence, these are largely based on “clinical” methods that rely on the experiences and insights of the trainers. This certainly was the case for Carnegie because in the 1930s there was no published research on methods of developing manager/leader interpersonal skills. Indeed, an exhaustive review of leadership intervention research found only one empirical study prior to 1950 that dealt with any sort of leadership/managerial development (Avolio et al., 2005).

Despite the lack of research and theories of the role of interpersonal skills in developing leaders, there was a body of research in the early to mid-1900s demonstrating that communication and social skills were important predictors of leadership emergence and effectiveness (Bass, 1990; Stogdill, 1974). The closest theoretical grounding for interpersonal skills training is rooted in the well-known distinction between task-oriented leader behaviors or styles and relationship-oriented behaviors (Likert, 1961; Stogdill & Coons, 1957). Focusing on enhancing the relationship-oriented aspects of leader behavior was promoted by Fleishman (1953), and led to programs aimed at developing the interpersonal relationship skills of leaders. Although Boyatzis (1982) and others emphasized the importance of interpersonal and communication skills in developing competent leaders, there has been no unified theoretical framework to guide the delivery of these training programs.

More recent leadership theories also recognize the importance of interpersonal skill training in effective leadership, particularly theories of leadership that emphasize the quality of leader–follower relationships, such as Leader–Member Exchange (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2003) and Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). In some cases, enhancement of leader interpersonal skills is embedded in a leadership development program growing out of a particular leadership theory. For example, in the leadership development program emanating from transformational leadership theory, emphasis is placed on developing interpersonal skills such as effective listening and building trusting relationships (Avolio, 1999, 2005). In addition, a great many comprehensive leadership/management development programs in large corporations include interpersonal skill development as an

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