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Sensitive but not sentimental: Emotionally intelligent people can put their emotions aside when necessary

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ABSTRACT

Are emotionally intelligent people sentimental? Does their greater sensitivity handicap them or are they able, as theory would expect, to experience and regulate emotions flexibly, depending on their goals? We examined this issue in organizational settings. Good managers are indeed expected to be both attuned to feelings (theirs as well as their subordinates') and able to put them aside when needed to take tough (but necessary) decisions. Our results show that emotionally intelligent managers do make better managers, as reflected by greater managerial competencies, higher team efficiency and less stressed subordinates. Moreover, and most importantly, emotionally intelligent managers are not just nicer managers. As our results show, emotional intelligence has nothing to do with sentimentality. Actually, it is managers with low EI who have the greatest difficulties to put their emotions aside and not let them interfere when inappropriate.

1. Introduction

Although all humans experience emotions, they markedly differ in the extent to which they identify, understand, regulate, and use their emotions and those of others. The construct of emotional intelligence (EI) has been proposed to account for this variability (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Besides the tremendous amount of research that it has generated, this concept has also aroused an on-going interest among lay people and the business world (Goleman, 1995, 1998a, 1998b). The latter has been the first sector to realize the potential of EI, paradoxically before clinical and health settings, which only took interest in EI applications recently (Cordovil de Susa Uva et al., 2010; Mikolajczak, Petrides, & Hurry, 2009). The business world's early interest in EI originally came from the fact that it provided an easy and straightforward explanation for why people with a high IQ and high technical skills do not always make good managers. Companies saw in EI the ideal candidate to improve selection (EI tests would increase the likelihood to put the right men in the right place) and training processes (EI training would compensate for people's soft skills weaknesses). Each year, companies invest billions of dollars in emotional intelligence and play a significant role in EI research, by raising questions, stimulating scientific investigations, and motivating researchers to convert their results in applied interventions.

The current research also stems from organizational preoccupations and aims to address some companies' fear that managers trained to be more emotionally intelligent would become sentimental and incapable of taking "hard" decisions (e.g., firing some people to preserve the job of the great majority). While this question represents a pragmatic preoccupation of companies, it constitutes a legitimate question that has never been addressed so far: Are emotionally intelligent people sentimental? Namely, might their greater sensitivity constitute a handicap, particularly in circumstances in which emotions need to be put aside? This question is highly relevant as the label "emotional intelligence" would not be suitable if emotionally intelligent people cannot put their emotions aside when needed. Should emotionally intelligent people be sentimental, there might be considerably less benefit for companies to hire managers on that basis.

In addition to its practical relevance, this issue is also interesting from a research point of view. It indeed lies at the intersection of three subfields in EI research: EI and empathy, EI and emotion regulation, and EI and decision-making. Regarding empathy, research shows that people with high EI decode others' emotions more quickly and more accurately (Austin, 2004; Edgar, McRorie & Sneddon, in press), and that they are more sensitive to others' misfortunes (Austin, Evans, Goldwater, & Potter, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Regarding emotion regulation, the literature indicates that people with high EI are better able to deal with emo-

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tionally difficult situations (Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011; Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quoidbach, 2008; Mikolajczak, Roy, Luminet, Fillée, & de Timary, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, Galloway, & Davidson, 2007; Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, & Hollander, 2002). As far as decision-making is concerned, the results are mixed, such that it is difficult to conclude whether high EI would lead people to make their decisions intuitively on an affect-based manner (as reported by Leary, Reilly, & Brown, 2009) or rationally, based on deliberate and thoughtful reasoning (as suggested by Laborde, Dosseville, & Scelles, 2010). The few studies which examined whether EI improved decision-making in the lab have yielded contradictory results (Day & Carroll, 2004; Demaree, Burns, & DeDonno, 2010; Telle, Senior, & Buttler, 2011). Therefore, we currently do not know whether EI would help people to put emotions aside when the decision-making process requires it.

Theoretically, one would expect EI to foster sensitivity but *not* sentimentality. Although people with high EI are more sensitive, more affected by others' misfortune and more empathic, their greater ability to regulate their emotions should help them to put emotions aside when necessary. Therefore, and this is the main hypothesis of this study, we expect managers who have high EI, to be perceived as having high EI by their employees and to be perceived as more capable of making emotionally difficult decisions by their employees.

Besides, we also hope to replicate previous findings showing that emotional intelligence is related to better managerial competencies (e.g., Gardner & Stough, 2002; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Wong & Law, 2002), and extend them by examining the impact of the manager's level of EI on his/her team effectiveness and his/her subordinates' stress. Although it has already been demonstrated that the subordinates' *own level of EI* influences team effectiveness (e.g., Jordan, Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Hooper, 2002; Jordan & Troth, 2004) and their own levels of stress (e.g., Slaski & Cartwright, 2002), it has never been shown, to our knowledge, that the *manager's level of EI* influences the effectiveness of his/her team and the level of stress of his/her subordinates. If this is right, it would mean that increasing managers' EI would have a double advantage: improving their performance and well-being, but also their subordinates'.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

In total, two hundred and one employees took part in the study. Sixty-seven managers were surveyed (mean age: 43.88; SD = 10; 64% men and 36% women), as well as two subordinates per manager (mean age: 32.5; SD = 9; 51% men and 49% women). The data were collected by two interviewers who went on site in each company, after being allowed by phone or email to bring questionnaires. They met the manager, as well as the two first available subordinates. Each member of the triad (manager, subordinate 1, subordinate 2) completed the questionnaires separately. Managers completed measures of self-perceived emotional intelligence and managerial performance. Subordinates appraised their manager's emotional intelligence, managerial performance, and ability to put emotions aside when necessary. The latter also completed measures of stress and team effectiveness. Responses were anonymous, but people were identified with sophisticated codes to permit data matching.

2.2. Measures

Emotional intelligence (managers' self-appraisal) was assessed using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF; (TEIQue-SF; Petrides, 2009). This measure comprises 30 seven-point items (from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) providing a global EI score. In this study, the internal consistency (alpha) of the scale was 0.90. Examples of items are « *I'm usually able to find ways to control my emotions when I want to* » and « *Generally, I find it difficult to know exactly what emotion I'm feeling* (Reversed) ».

Subordinate perception of their manager' emotional intelligence was assessed using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-360-Short Form (TEIQue 360°-SF; see Petrides, Niven, & Mouskounti, 2006). This measure, designed for peers or 360° assessment, consists of 15 items, each representing one of the 15 facets of the TEIQue. Its internal consistency was 0.93 in the present study. Examples of items are "My manager [*N + 1*] *is able to express his/her feelings to others*]" and "M*y manager* [*N + 1*] *is good at managing others' emotions*".

Ability to put one's emotions aside when necessary was assessed using a measure developed for the purpose of this study. This measure comprises 7 four-point items, rated from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Its internal consistency was 0.88. Example of items are: "*My manager* [*N + 1*] *is able to put his/her emotions aside in order to take disciplinary actions when necessary*", "*My manager* [*N + 1*] *would be able to settle a disagreement between two subordinates*", "*My manager* [*N + 1*] *could make decisions for the good of the company, at the risk of displeasing some of his subordinates*", "*My manager* [*N + 1*] *would let an employee arrange their schedule for personal reasons, even if this would hinder the department's operation" (reversed).*

Subordinate's perceived stress was evaluated via the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS: Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The PSS is a 10-item scale designed to measure the degree to which individuals appraise their life as stressful. All items begin with the same phrase: In the past month, how often have you felt… (e.g., *In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?*). It is scored on a 4-point Likert scale. The PSS reliability was 0.88 in this study.

Perceived team effectiveness was measured using a 7-item scale, scored on a four-point Likert scale (totally disagree to totally agree) (Balon & Ruosi, 2010). Sample items are *"Our team feels responsible for its work", "Our team is efficient" "Our team cooperates"*. The reliability was 0.93 in this sample.

Managerial competence was appraised using a 14-item questionnaire adapted by Jaeken (2008) from the "Leadership Architect" (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003). Sample items are (preceded by "*I am able to…*" for the manager self-assessment, and by "*My manager is able to…*" for evaluation by subordinates) "*…. be efficient and productive in terms of time management, definition of goals and priorities, and commitment fulfilment*" "*…acquire new competencies in order to prepare for future challenges*", "*… motivate the team*", "*…manage the variety of views and experiences of collaborators, in order to get the most out of it*". The reliability was 0.79 in the present sample.

2.3. Statistical analyses

As subordinates were nested in managers, mixed models (i.e., multi-level models) were used to analyze the data. In order to get a single indicator of managers' level of EI (self-appraisals correlated 0.60 with subordinates' perceptions), we factor-analyzed the evaluations of managers and subordinates (supposing that both contained a grain of truth), and used the factor score as an indicator of managers' EI. This value has a correlation of 0.89 with both the subordinate reports and the managers' self-evaluation. It is of note that the results and their significance remain unchanged whether we run the analyses using the managers' self-report, the subordinates' evaluation, or the factor score. In order to facilitate the graphical representation of the effects, we categorized managers' EI in three levels (bottom to percentile 33.33; percentile