Emotional Intelligence Training: A Case of Caveat Emptor

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Training programmes available purporting to develop emotional intelligence are widely available yet to date few empirical studies have appeared in the literature providing support that training results in demonstrable changes to EI, and more significantly whether these changes can then be traced to more positive individual or organisational outcomes. This paper questions the usefulness of personality/mixed model conceptualisations of EI that underpin many training programmes as offering nothing new beyond our existing understanding of the importance of soft skills training in the workplace. Instead the paper argues that research should be directed at better understanding how emotional abilities associated with the ability model of EI might be targeted by human resource development practitioners in organisations. In this respect a rationale is posited as to why workplace learning methods may potentially offer some success in this area.

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Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been suggested as providing a new perspective on how leadership and teamwork necessary for performance in today’s workplace might be more effective and better understood (Barling, Slater, & Kelloway 2000; Gardner & Stough 2002). Although its origins lay in much earlier work in social intelligence (Gardner 1993), the more recent emergence of the concept of emotional intelligence as representing a distinct but neglected area of intellectual functioning has attracted both accolade and controversy in equal measure. Accolade has arrived primarily as a result of initially popularised accounts of the concept which heralded emotional intelligence as offering new insights into understanding and predicting human behaviour as well as a more optimistic future for securing psychological well-being and functioning (Goleman 1995). Critics of EI by contrast have dismissed it as an unproven concept which adds nothing to our understanding of individual differences beyond already existing psychological dimensions (Woodruffe 2001). Whilst others have voiced concerns over what actually constitutes the domain of the construct and how it is then measured (Roberts, Zeidner & Matthews 2001). Specifically within the field of human resource development, relatively few articles have appeared examining the concept. For the most part however, with few notable exceptions (c.f.Landen 2002) these have generally endorsed the significance of the concept as opening a new avenue for understanding behaviour and performance in the workplace and as a result, advocated the need to develop appropriate workplace interventions that target employees’ emotional intelligence (Kunnanatt 2004; Opengart 2005; Weinberger 2002). To date however, little has appeared in the literature that details the effectiveness of EI development programmes or methods based on findings from studies so far, arguably impeding both future research and practice in this area. This paper therefore aims to contribute to our understanding in this area in reviewing key issues and challenges involved in developing EI, and highlighting what we
Currently know from the literature regarding its potential for development. Importantly it is argued that training programmes aimed at developing emotional intelligence based on mixed/personality models offer little more than a re-packaging of previous soft skills training and as a result offer us little in the way of better understanding the true potential of EI in the workplace. Instead, given the increasing evidence within the literature concerning validity of the ability model of EI, research is advocated that enables us to better understand how such abilities develop and how they may be influenced through HRD interventions if the distinctive benefits of EI are to be realised. Based on key insights from the literature, it is suggested that workplace learning methods may offer particularly salient means through which this potentially may be accomplished.

The Impact of Training on Emotional Intelligence?

Throughout the popular literature the number and range of interventions or programmes posited as assisting individuals to develop their emotional intelligence continues to burgeon (Chapman 2004; Cooper 1997; Martinez 1997). Chief amongst such interventions, the number of training programmes have multiplied in response to popularised notions that emotional intelligence may offer a new edge on organisational performance. Indeed calls for training in EI have now become commonplace in many professions and organisational settings but particularly in the human service sectors including medicine (Carrothers et al 2004); nursing (Freshwater & Stickley 2004); pharmacy (Latif 2004); and the legal profession (Silver 1999). Yet despite the increasing number of articles appearing in the literature describing EI programmes (Bagshaw 2000; Orme & Langhorn 2003), any substantive evidence demonstrating their effectiveness is elusive at best. Instead, many programmes are sold on the basis of positive testimonials and flimsy anecdotes, often eagerly consumed by organisations desperate to ensure their employees aren’t missing out on their piece of emotional pie. Cherniss & Caplan (2001) are less than atypical in this respect when they relate how at the company, American Express, financial advisors undertook a programme of training in ‘emotional competence’ in order to assist advisors to cope with the emotional demands of selling life insurance. They infuse that,

“[They] learn about the impact of emotions on human behaviour, and how to identify and manage their own emotional reaction. The findings suggest that advisors who receive the training generate more sales revenue than the advisors who did not get the training” (p287).

However the authors do not provide any substantive empirical data to support these claims. This data appears to be based on the study undertaken by Luskin, Aberman & DeLorenzo which can be found described under a number of studies listed on the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations website yet even here statistical tests for 36 trainees who participated in the programme are not adequately reported. Indeed the authors conclude that

“The limitations of this project…leave open the possibility that the results were due to the motivation of these advisors to improve themselves rather than from the power of this training (p4)”.

Yet this study along with either anecdotal, contested claims regarding the actual impact of EI, or participants’ satisfaction with training is increasingly used as the chief means by which many EI training programmes are sold to individuals and organisations:
“The difference between highly successful people and those who simply do well is now well researched. It is a combination of qualities, which Daniel Goleman has popularised under the name of Emotional Intelligence”.
(www.eiworld.org/welcome.htm)

“Research is clear Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the single greatest contributor to personal excellence and leadership. Increased EQ moves individuals and teams to increased resilience in the face of change, enhanced performance and greater success! (www.ihhp.com/personal_lead.htm).

“Research tracking over 160 high performing individuals in a variety of industries and job levels revealed that emotional intelligence was two times as important in contributing to excellence than intellect and expertise alone” (www.ihhp.com/what_is_eq.htm)

“Let us train your staff to avoid situations that can cost your business money. Our EQ training courses teach your employees to avoid creating or perpetuating situations that can cost you thousands of dollars in unnecessary legal fees and settlements. Included are: Sexual harassment, mobbing, discrimination, fraud, multicultural issues, bullying, dismissal, hostile workplace, conflict resolution, stress management, communication and other sensitive issues”. (www.webstrategies.cc/eit.htm)

Robust evidence regarding the actual impact of training either on emotional intelligence or more significantly on any of the performance related outcomes EI is often claimed to influence, is therefore a rare commodity. It is unsurprising then that increasingly there have been calls for a more rigorous programme of research to examine the potential for developing employees’ emotional intelligence (Law, Wong & Song 2004). Yet building a more coherent body of knowledge in the area is immediately beset by the challenges posed by the lack of consistency and consensus within the literature regarding how emotional intelligence is actually defined. In this respect the literature on emotional intelligence remains a contested area in terms of its theoretical dimensions and consequently on how the construct is to be measured. This lack of coherence in conceptualising EI similarly makes it difficult to make appropriate comparisons or judgements regarding the effectiveness of any interventions. We are thus immediately confronted with the question of ‘what’ precisely are EI programmes supposed to be developing. Here three major models have dominated much of the writing on emotional intelligence to date. Although sharing some overlap in places, these models essentially make very different claims regarding what the nature of emotional intelligence actually is, and clearly then as a result what might be the target of any intervention. These have been commonly referred to as (1) mental ability models (Salovey & Mayer 1990; Mayer et al 2002) (2) mixed ability models (Bar-On 1997; Dulewicz & Higgs 2000) and (3) personality models (Goleman & Cherniss 1998).

1. Ability Models
Mayer & Salovey’s (1997) original ability or performance based model defines EI as the

   “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p10).

Here emotional ability is perceived most clearly as a cogent set of abilities that involve the capacity to identify, reason with and utilise emotions effectively. Specifically (a) the ability to perceive emotion, (b) the ability to integrate emotion to facilitate thought, (c) the ability to understand emotions, and (d) the ability to manage emotions.
2. **Mixed/Ability Models**

Within this second category, EI by contrast is seen as comprising both aspects of personality as well as abilities to perceive and manage emotions. Although there are a number of models that fall within this category, arguably the most developed has been that developed by Bar-On (1997). Here EI is defined as,

“the emotional, personal, social, and survival dimensions of intelligence, which are often more important for daily functioning than the more traditional cognitive aspects of intelligence. Emotional intelligence is concerned with understanding oneself and others, relating to people, and adapting to and coping with the immediate surroundings to be more successful in dealing with environmental demands…In a way, to measure emotional intelligence is to measure one’s ‘common sense’ and ability to get along in the world” (p1).

This model includes fifteen subscales underpinning five dimensions of the construct giving rise to a measure of an individual’s emotional quotient (EQ). These are identified as (1) intrapersonal EQ, comprising amongst other variables emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, and self-actualisation; (2) interpersonal EQ, which includes relationship skills and empathy; (3) Adaptability tapping areas such as problem-solving and flexibility; (4) Stress management which includes impulse control and stress tolerance; and (5) General mood comprising happiness and optimism. Within this conceptualisation of EI the most notable distinction is the far wider array of elements that are contained within the EI domain in addition to those that might be considered more strictly as emotional abilities.

3. **Personality Models**

Finally, the third approach to conceptualising emotional intelligence is the most popularised model of EI which has been advocated by Goleman and his colleagues and which arguably is furthest from a distinct focus on EI abilities per se (Cherniss & Goleman 2001; Goleman 1998). Here emotional intelligence is instead viewed as comprising a diverse range of emotional dispositions as well as competences, which range from motives and individual traits to a number of learned capabilities. These are all contained within five separate elements of the EI construct, accounting for 25 different competences with the categories of: (a) self-awareness, (b) motivation, (c) self-regulation, (d) empathy and (e) adeptness in relationships (Goleman 1998).

Goleman (1998) suggests that these competences are pivotal to learning job-related skills which then are able to channel EI for specific performance capabilities. He argues that,

“An emotional competence is a learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance at work…Our emotional intelligence determines our potential for learning the practical skills that are based on its five elements..” (p24)

Of these three models, the latter two in particular have come under increased and intense criticism, both in terms of the considerable ambiguity and the multi-faceted way in which the construct is conceptualised, as well as the particular approaches advocated for its measurement (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts 2004). A number of studies for example, have demonstrated that these constructs of EI fail to qualify for acceptable conditions of an intelligence both on conceptual and correlational grounds. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that these measures of EI often share considerable conceptual overlap with personality attributes such as those contained in the Big Five (Costa & MacRae 1985) as well existing measures of social and psychological functioning such as anxiety and the SCL-90 (Law, Wong & Song 2004). By
contrast, a number of studies suggest that the Mayer & Salovey (1997) ability model represents a far more conceptually relevant measure of the construct (Law et al 2004).

Questions concerning both the validity and content of construct direct considerations of how emotional intelligence may be developed. In relation to mixed/personality models, some positive findings have been reported suggesting that training has an impact on some of the key interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. Slaski & Cartwright (2003) for example evaluated a four day developmental EI training programme which was attended by 60 retail managers over four weeks. Using a pre- and 6 month post measures research design and a comparison group they demonstrated positive support for the training intervention with scores on two separate self-report measures of EI (The Bar-On EQ-i (19) and the Dulewicz & Higgs (2000) EIQ). No changes however were found in performance following training however, explained as possibly due to the performance measure failing to capture some of the more emotion based management competencies. They concluded that training has a positive effect on EI but that it was impossible to determine which aspects of training were more effective in developing EI than others. Although not located in a peer reviewed journal, a study reporting the effects of an EI training programme by Sala on behalf of the Haygroup (http:/ei.haygroup) has also suggested that training can have positive effects on EI, using the emotional competencies identified by Goleman (1998). Two groups of participants (20 Brazilian managers and consultants) and 19 participants from a large US accounting organisation) attended two 5-day workshops were pre and post test measures were taken using the Emotional Intelligence Inventory (ECI) a multi-rater instrument that provides self, manager, direct report and peer ratings on a series of behavioural indicators. Time between pre and post test was 8 months and 14 months for the first and second groups respectively. A pre-post test evaluation design (although no control group was included) using paired t-tests demonstrated improvements in 8 of the 20 variables comprising the ECI for the first group and 19 of the 20 variables for the second group. The author concludes that training interventions are effective at improving EI. However maturational effects may have influenced the findings. The findings from the studies available do then provide some indication that training potentially may have positive effects on EI when measured as a set of behavioural competencies associated with interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

It is doubtful that anyone would argue that those interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of personality and mixed models of EI might not have positive benefits within the workplace. However it does lead us to ask whether what actually comprises the content of training underpinned by the personality and mixed model conceptions of EI is nothing more than a re-packaging of interpersonal or soft skills training. Indeed recently Bar-On now refers to his EI model as a model of emotional and social intelligence (Bar-On 2003) suggesting that this conception of EI may be far more akin to social intelligence than emotional intelligence. Criticisms that much EI training is nothing more than the emperor’s new clothes may well then have some justification. Training based on mixed model and personality conceptions of EI therefore run the risk of undermining the potential benefits that might be gained from training or development programmes based around more valid measures of the construct such as those contained in the ability model (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey 1999).

Developing Emotional Intelligence as a Set of Emotional Abilities

If the ability model of EI is accepted as more closely meeting the criteria to be classified as an intelligence, the extent to which EI is amenable to development however may well depend on the particular nature of this type of intelligence. Cattell (1943) distinguished between two different
forms of intelligence, termed fluid and crystallised. Using the metaphor of a liquid, fluid intelligence was characterised through its capacity to be free-flowing, and flow everywhere in order to fuel all aspects of cognitive operations and memory. In particular it was seen to be responsible for higher mental functioning capabilities such as problem-solving and abstract thinking abilities and reasoning, and as such closely associated with the biological basis of mental activity. This is distinguished from crystallised intelligence, which is seen as being based on the knowledge acquired during life which influences an individual’s ability to perform and is closely associated with abilities such as verbal comprehension and semantic relations. As the knowledge base associated with crystallised intelligence grows, so the ability to solve complicated problems increases as there exists a greater reservoir of experiential knowledge to draw upon. Furthermore there seems to be an increasing shift from fluid to crystallised intelligence to underpin performance as individuals progress into adulthood (Schweizer & Koch 2002). Importantly, in contrast to fluid intelligence, crystallised intelligence is thought to be capable of significant development (Cattell 1987).

Lee et al (2000) sought to determine whether the fluid/crystallised distinction of intelligence could be applied to the concept of social intelligence. Within their study, social knowledge was hypothesised to reflect crystallised social intelligence whereas social inference was hypothesised to reflect fluid social intelligence. Social knowledge was then measured assessing individuals’ knowledge of social etiquette. Social inference on the other hand comprised a measure that sought to capture the ability to read perceptual clues and the ability to make accurate inferences about others internal states and motivations. Their results lend some support for the multidimensional nature of the social intelligence construct, and the authors suggested that the fluid/crystallised distinction could be applied to this form of intelligence. It might well be the case then that differing emotional abilities contained within the domain of the ability construct of emotional intelligence may well reflect differing underlying fluid or crystallised components. This would imply that certain abilities associated with emotional intelligence might be more susceptible to development than others. Determining the nature of ability dimensions of EI thus opens up the possibility of a more theoretically grounded programme of research to investigate which particular emotional abilities are susceptible to development and what approaches may be more effective in doing so.

To date though there has yet to be one study reported in the literature that has sought to investigate the effects of a training programme on the development of specific emotional abilities. However, a few studies to date suggest that workplace or on-the-job learning methods may have some positive influence. Workplace learning refers to that learning that occurs whilst at work or in the context of performing one’s job, sometimes also called informal learning (Clarke 2004). An important aspect of workplace learning is that learning is seen to arise as much if not more so from actually participating in the processes and systems of work itself. Moriarty & Buckley (2003) evaluated a 12 week OB experiential learning programme for undergraduate students that included practical experience of working in teams. Using a measure of team emotional intelligence developed by Jordan et al (1999), they demonstrated significant gains in particular ability dimensions of EI over a 12 week period. Although the measures used in the study were based on both self and team assessment against the WEIP dimensions and not actual tests as recommended by Mayer & Salovey (1997), the inclusion of two forms of ability related measures arguably strengthens the study’s design and importantly the WEIP has been found to be closely associated with Mayer & Salovey’s (1997) ability model. Significant changes were found in self ratings in 3 of the 4 dimensions of the construct, Ability to deal with others’ emotions. Changes to the overall measure of the construct were also statistically significant although the
authors were unable to demonstrate any statistically significant changes in self ratings on any of the dimensions of the *Ability to deal with own emotions* construct. These results suggest some support for team-based experiential learning activities as having a positive influence on the development of the two emotional abilities, the use of emotions to facilitate thinking and the ability to perceive emotions. Importantly however no changes were found in the emotional dimensions associated with managing emotions. The authors do not comment on why this dimension in particular may have been least influenced by the teamwork experience, but it may well be that changes in the ability to manage emotions occur over a much longer time frame.

Findings from a few qualitative studies examining emotional work within the service sector may offer a different explanation. A recent study by Clarke (in press) exploring the significance of workplace learning for healthcare practitioners, identified workplace learning as a chief means through which hospice workers developed their professional capabilities for managing their emotions in these highly emotionally charged workplaces. Based on the analysis of qualitative data obtained from two focus groups, he suggested that workplace learning methods were valued by staff because of the role they played in enabling healthcare practitioners within hospices both to develop coping skills, and manage emotion and anxiety. Many hospice staff participating in the study indicated how learning on the job and within the context of their social networks were powerful mechanisms for enabling them to manage both their own emotions arising from their work as well as those they cared for. Clarke suggested that learning how to manage emotion arose through undertaking the job itself, and the opportunity to reflect on and share these experiences with others in the work setting. Importantly the emotional ability, to manage emotions was seen as influenced and enacted by the particular situational context in which these workers operated within. Akerjorder & Severinsson (2004) explored mental health nurses experience of EI in their nursing practice and identified four key areas where emotional intelligence was considered to be highly significant for these nurses. This was (1) within the context of their relationships with patients, (2) the substance of supervision, (3) as a source of their motivation and (4) as enabling them to carry out their responsibilities. Importantly the ability to manage emotion was again seen as arising from the demands and within the context of the patient relationship. Managing emotions was negotiated within each patient encounter and in this sense situationally dependent. Similar to Clarke above, informal learning was seen as a key means through which such abilities were developed, in particular suggested in this study through supervision. Together although rather limited, the findings from these few studies are significant in that tend to suggest that different dimensions of emotional intelligence may be particularly capable of development through informal or workplace learning mechanisms. But of particular interest they also suggest that a key dimension of the ability model of emotional intelligence, the ability to manage emotions, might be far more appropriately understood as an ability that only has meaning when considered within its situational context.

**The Significance of Workplace Learning for Developing Emotional Abilities**

The findings from these few small scale studies provide only limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of workplace learning for developing emotional abilities however they do nonetheless present an opportunity for theorising why and how workplace learning in particular may influence the development of emotional abilities. Significantly, it may be due to the contextualised nature of some emotional abilities. This would correspond with research elsewhere that has suggested that aspects of social competence are unlikely to represent an independent set of specific abilities but instead contingent on particular circumstances and
environment in which the ability is enacted (Hall & Bernieri 2001). Managing one’s and others’ emotions might similarly underpin a wide ranging set of behaviours that are highly dependent on the situation an individual finds themselves, influenced by both organisational and job demands. Some emotional abilities may therefore be associated with emotional knowledge and learning that is gained within a specific job context, underpinned by a socio-cultural perspective of learning (Brown & Duguid 1991). Previously Jordan et al (2002) have criticised ability measures of emotional intelligence for failing to acknowledge the extent to which social and cultural influences and cues play a large part in aspects of emotional expression and management. Some emotional abilities may therefore best be understood within the emotional display rules of a particular organisation and work setting, an area that has been increasingly recognised within the field of emotional labour (Hoschild 1983).

The concept of communities of practice (Wenger 1998) may offer a lens through which to understand how emotional competence is socially and culturally defined and shared within the workplace. It is here that through ongoing interactions the norms and cultural cues that are associated with language, routines, artefacts and processes are produced and reproduced. Emotional competence is therefore achieved through gaining access to this shared repertoire and developing the ability to use it effectively. Through participation in such social structures individuals make sense of emotional abilities and are then able to negotiate their meaning within a particular work setting. Engagement with learning communities through joint working, problem-solving and dialogue provides a means through which a greater understanding of emotional knowledge associated with emotional abilities can be gained. Recognising the situated nature of emotional abilities suggests that it is through supporting and developing opportunities for social learning and exchange that abilities associated with emotional intelligence might be developed. Such learning opportunities also offer a greater likelihood for tacit learning and development of emotional abilities to occur. Ongoing exchanges between organisational members, carrying out work tasks and reflection on emotional experiences then enable a collective meaning to be given to emotional knowledge and how that knowledge is used within the workplace. Opportunities for ongoing reflection and dialogue within a workplace context would therefore seem key to developing emotional abilities. The situated nature of some emotional abilities suggested here, may indicate that training programmes that decontextualise the nature of emotional knowledge that underpins such abilities from particular workplaces may not be the most effective means for doing so.

**Conclusions**

Despite the growth in training programmes that purport to influence emotional intelligence there remains little empirical support regarding their effectiveness. From a HRD practitioner perspective, the personality and mixed models offer a conceptualisation of emotional intelligence neatly packaged as sets of competences that arguably fit more easily with traditional training approaches to employee development. Furthermore previous research in the area of interpersonal and intrapersonal social skills training can be drawn upon to underpin their design and effectiveness. However the widespread use of the emotional competences associated with the mixed and personality models of EI within much of these training programmes raises serious doubts as to whether what is indeed being developed within such programmes actually qualifies as emotional intelligence. In this sense the claims made by many training programmes in relation to developing emotional intelligence should be treated with some caution. Instead research should focus on how distinct emotional abilities associated with the ability model of emotional
intelligence may be developed in the workplace in order to better inform human resource development practice in this area. In this respect workplace learning interventions may offer an effective means for both understanding how emotional abilities may develop within an organisational context and suggest a range of strategies for assisting HRD practitioners to do so.

References


