

Social Intelligence: the Heart and Science of Human Relationships by Charlene J. Phipps

Social intelligence was first defined in 1920 as “the ability to act wisely in human relationships”. Since that time, research on social intelligence has suggested how it is linked with everything from workplace success and student achievement to general well being and health.

What is social intelligence?

It was the third day of an intensive leadership development program. A small group of leaders was working with David, a man who came to the program with a reputation as a visionary and the ability to weave together ideas for highly successful business ventures. However, a recent setback caused him to begin to doubt his wisdom and leadership. He realized he needed but was not getting honest insights and feedback from colleagues and employees about his leadership or the direction of the business. In his leadership coaching group his warm smiles and encouraging words gave the appearance of a charismatic leader. And yet, when he attempted to lead the group, David sometimes alienated others and the results of his leadership were not nearly as powerful as we suspected they would be. We struggled to give him helpful feedback about what he was doing that helped and hindered his leadership. Finally, a group member asked, “Was there a time here when he was attempting to lead that we did feel inspired to follow him?”

Everyone in the group recalled the same scene: at one point David had physically leaned into the group and made intense eye contact with every person. At that point, when we felt his human connection with us, we were inspired to follow him. In the ensuing conversation we realized that his characteristic communication style was to look up away from the group members to visualize his ideas in his own head and to physically move back from those he was talking with. We discovered that he was literally losing his connection with us as he spoke. Although his words were inspiring, he was not creating the powerful chemistry of the human connection required to move us to follow him. With that insight, he used the remainder of his time in the program to discover learnable social intelligence behaviors and assumptions to become a truly charismatic leader.

Self-Awareness is defined as knowing, honoring and managing one's self as the foundation for authentic relationships. Empathy entails the capacity to accurately understand others and to engage in compassionate, nonjudgmental interactions. Social Influence is the capacity to understand social situations and to influence others to engage in considerate, thoughtful relationships.

Why is the human connection so important to leadership and other kinds of social exchanges and what are the social intelligence competences needed to successfully connect with one another? The field of social intelligence gives us answers. Social intelligence was first defined in 1920 as “the ability to act wisely in human relationships” (Thorndike, 1920). Since that time, research on social intelligence has suggested how it is linked with everything from workplace success and student achievement to general well being and health. (Bar-On 2005, Druskat 2006). Within the context of six kinds of human intelligence—abstract, practical, emotional, social, aesthetic, and kinesthetic—social intelligence is identified as the capacity to relate with others, while emotional intelligence is more about awareness and management of oneself. (Gardner 1993).

Social intelligence has much in common with emotional intelligence. For example, both are concerned with awareness of emotions in oneself and others. However there are keen differences between the two. Goleman (2007) contends that emotional intelligence focuses on individual awareness and expression of feelings, while social intelligence emphasizes what happens between people in relationships. Goleman's social intelligence model identifies two key components: 1) social awareness, which includes empathy for and attunement with others and knowing how the social world works, and 2) social facility, which mediates effective social interactions by getting in sync with others and having the presence to shape social outcomes.

Currently there is not agreement about the definitive behaviors and attitudes of social and emotional intelligence. However, reviews of research and literature on social intelligence (Albrecht, Barchard, etc.) consistently refer to three basic competencies: Self Awareness, Empathy, and Social Influence (often referred to as regulation of self and others). These three are the basis of the Social Intelligence Styles questionnaire and educational materials. Self Awareness is defined as knowing, honoring and managing one's self as the foundation for making considerate choices about behaviors affecting relationships. Empathy entails the capacity to accurately understand others and to engage in compassionate, nonjudgmental interactions.

People connect with and affect one another in tangible ways whether or not they choose to do so or are conscious that the connection is happening. Daniel Goleman refers to this affinity for human connection as “emotional WI FI...a remarkable neural event: the formation between two brains of a functional link, a feedback loop that crosses the skin-and-skull barrier between bodies.”

Social influence is the capacity to understand social situations and to influence others to act in ways that positively impact social interactions and outcomes. All three are essential for fulfilling interpersonal relationships.

The new science of interpersonal relationships

While the field of social intelligence identifies powerful competencies for interpersonal interaction, the “new science of relationships” illuminates how the brain actually promotes human connection and communication. Much of the excitement around the neuroscience of relationships comes from the sense of finally unlocking the mysteries of our human connection, something so key to our existence, yet until recently was relegated to the status of “touchy feely.” Behavioral neuroscientists can now study brain processes underlying human behavior and interaction. Microelectrodes are used to measure the electrical activity of neurons in the brain and brain scans indicate increased activity in specific parts of the brain while people are engaged in activities such as remembering, speaking or connecting with others.

An amazing recent discovery from neuroscience is that the human connection is mediated by the brain’s “mirror neurons,” which give human beings (and other creatures) the propensity to mimic one another’s behaviors. Beyond mimicry, these tiny neurons also create internal representations in our brains of what others are experiencing. In other words, we truly experience what others feel. People connect with and affect one another in tangible ways whether or not they choose to do so or are conscious that the connection is happening. Goleman refers to this affinity for human connection as emotional WI FI, “a remarkable neural event: the formation between two brains of a functional link, a feedback loop that crosses the skin-and-skull barrier between bodies” (Goleman, 2007). The implication for communication is that our connection with one another is more moving than our actual words. A truly meaningful conversation goes beyond just talking or sharing information. It evokes our underlying social intelligence—the language of emotional connection through empathy, the self awareness of the feelings we transmit to others as

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we connect, and the awesome responsibility that comes from knowing how powerfully we can affect others.

Daniel Siegel, a pioneer in the neuroscience of relationships tells us, "Our brains are profoundly social...we need connections to other people to feel in balance and to develop well (Siegel 2006)." He explains how interpersonal relationships help the brain balance emotions, regulate the body and increase self awareness. According to Siegel the human connection is necessary for people to sustain their "flow of well-being." From birth though childhood, we attune to our parents for regulating our physiology and for patterns of interaction and care that develop our emotional and physical well-being. This foundational relationship establishes the biological, behavioral and psychological structure that carries through to our adulthood (Cozolino 2006)."

Human development through relationship does not stop in childhood. In our adult relationships, our interactions can literally forge new pathways in each other's brains that change our assumptions and behaviors (Cohen 2005). Chemistry between people is more than a cliché. Just as parents' behaviors affect the present and future well being of their children, so do adult behaviors in the workplace affect colleagues. A different biochemical reaction is triggered with praise than with criticism; a different set of behaviors is set into play when people have the opportunity for genuine human connection as opposed to being isolated. The chemistry of workplace interactions is tangible; the quality of our connection with one another affects our ability to share information and coordinate our tasks as well as helps or hinders our professional growth and commitment to our teams and organizations. Understanding the neuroscience of relationships and applying the wisdom of social intelligence are keys to workplace communication and innovation.

Social intelligence can be learned!

Because social intelligence develops over a lifetime of learning, understanding and developing it requires more than cognitive learning such as reading and hearing information (although these are helpful as well). Social learning theory and appreciative inquiry are two approaches that have been found to be helpful in the development of

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social intelligence. Understanding how our past experience shapes what we think, feel and do in the present is the essence of social learning theory. Appreciative inquiry taps the power of positive thinking by engaging our intentions and focusing our attention on ideals and goals. Both methods tap the awesome power of the brain to forge neural pathways for new ideas and strengthen desired social interaction behaviors.

Social learning theory postulates that significant human experiences create assumptions and behaviors which we carry into the future in an effort to adapt to life's circumstances. In other words, our unique social histories and past relationship experiences will greatly influence our behavior in the present moment (Michels 1970). Ordinarily this is very helpful because past experience is a great teacher and can bring wisdom to new experiences. However, sometimes past experiences cloud the present with unrealistic or negative connotations.

Engaging our social intelligence requires that we clearly see and understand others in the present moment. Socially intelligent behavior can be difficult if our past experience is distorting the reality of the situation and our accurate reading of the other person's feelings and intentions. A key aspect of social intelligence development is learning to be as "clear" and present as possible. The simple act of becoming aware of how a past experience is clouding our perceptions is a powerful beginning for change. Once the awareness is there, seeing present situations more clearly and making more appropriate choices can actually begin to change the neural pathways of the brain. The more one focuses on new attitudes and behaviors the stronger they become. An essential insight from social learning theory is that human beings can identify and reframe past relationship experiences in order to bring clarity and make healthy choices about relationships in the present.

My favorite example of social learning theory in action is a recollection of a young boy in our neighborhood who had been bitten by a dog, and as a result, was terribly afraid our family dog Bess. His past experience had taught him dogs were dangerous, and even though Bess was friendly and wanted to play Chris would hide or

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run away when he saw her. One afternoon, I heard a light knock and when I opened the door there stood Chris with a black cape, tinfoil sword and look on his face that meant serious business. "Let her out!" he demanded. I knew at once what he wanted. I called Bess to the door, asked her to sit and talked calmly to both her and Chris. Over the next minutes a small miracle occurred. From somewhere deep inside, Chris had conjured up the courage to confront his fear by stepping closer to the dog and placing his hand on her head. Bess responded with wagging tail and wet kisses.

What was the stimulus for the boy's brave confrontation? Later that week I learned from his dad that he and Chris had been talking about the possibility of getting a puppy. As part of that conversation they talked about Chris's fear of dogs and pondered about whether or not that would interfere with his ability to care for the puppy. Of course I don't know for sure what Chris was thinking and feeling, but I can imagine that his desire to get the puppy gave him the courage to confront the fear that might prevent him from having it. The boy's brave confrontation clearly illustrates social learning theory. He got in touch with a fear from the past that was affecting his goals in the present. Facing that fear through confronting Bess was a catalyst for gaining a more realistic and helpful perspective, thus allowing him to achieve an important goal.

Like Chris, we all know that change feels risky and requires courage and persistence. One of the reasons why change is difficult is that "our brains are built to detect change in the environment and send out strong signals to alert us to anything unusual" (Rock, 2006). The brain circuitry that detects that something is amiss is very closely linked with a part of the brain called the amygdala, the center for registering strong emotions such as fear. One of our brain's responses to change is a warning signal to be wary! A way to overcome the fear triggered by the brain's warning and gain momentum for change is through the simple, yet powerful act of refocusing our attention. Training the brain to focus on desired change (rather than on problems or deficits) is a primary way to increase the social intelligence competencies of self awareness, empathy, and influence.

The "social intelligence sessions" facilitated by Innovative Human

The Social Intelligence Workshops developed by Innovative Human Dynamics are based on social learning theory, appreciating our strengths, and tapping the awesome power of the brain to refocus our attention on desired change.

Dynamics leaders are based on social learning theory, appreciating our strengths and tapping the awesome power of the brain to refocus our attention on desired change. We begin with individual appraisals to illuminate the strengths each person brings to his or her interpersonal relationships. This foundation lends clarity and confidence for individual exploration and the development of an ideal vision of one's self in relationship. Participants then move to social skill building. Social skills are honed in a fun and encouraging atmosphere augmented by tangible applications to workplace situations using video tapes and scenarios of real situations. The sessions conclude with affirmations of participants' strengths and individual strategies for maintaining social intelligence.

Just Imagine a Socially Intelligent Organization... and World

So far, we've focused on social intelligence for interpersonal relationships. Now imagine an organization in which everyone has mastered the core competencies of self-awareness, empathy and influence. How might we describe such an organization?

Just imagine, for example, the possibilities of an organization full of self aware people. In such an organization, open expression of thoughts, feelings and intentions allows people to truly see each other as they are, which in turn, fosters trusting and intimate human connections. There is a strong sense of the present moment in each interaction because each person is free of the bias of past disappointments and clear about the realities of present relationships and situations. Each person's knowledge of self and capacity to make good choices about relationships fosters a climate in which even the most risky or difficult topics can be discussed. People remain centered and okay within themselves and with others. In essence, the culture is characterized by taking responsibility for one's choices, feeling trust and safety for open discussion of ideas and being inspired to work closely with others to accomplish shared goals.

Now imagine an organization in which most people are also empathetic. People trust that others are truly interested in and compassionate about their intentions, problems, and highest hopes. The norm is

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that people take the time to accurately understand and compassionately respond to one another. They attune to one another through being present and through listening intently. Sensitivity to one another creates authentic and close relationships among people. Caring actions in support of others flourish. Networks of trusted colleagues to draw on for work resources abound. Synergy within and among work groups is a frequent and expected occurrence. The results are effective decisions, successful outcomes and products created from tapping all the best ideas and talents from every single person.

Imagine being led by people who have the perspective to see the needs and interests of the whole organization. They might be in appointed leadership positions, or they might pop up from just about anywhere because they are needed and have special talents. People trust the influence of these people because of their capacity to understand the dynamics of groups and other social situations. Even in difficult or threatening situations they maintain a caring and solid presence. People with this genuine capacity to influence others are honored for their vision and respected for transforming people and organizations through trusting relationships. The results in the organization are hope and high expectations, resiliency for problem solving, and cultivation of extraordinary individual and organizational success.

Now take one last step. Imagine a world of socially intelligent people. The Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) has engaged in a decade of research to document personal and global transformation. Insights and conclusions from their research include the following: Humans appear to be uniquely endowed with the capacity for large-scale cooperation through stable relationships and reciprocity. “This capacity comes from having the brain circuitry to adopt the perspective of another, which can further promote empathy and altruism. We also have a sophisticated limbic system involved in social bonding and loving one another. As a result humans have a natural capacity to be compassionate, cooperative, loving, and altruistic.” Further, they conclude that the consistent choices we make not only change our brain’s neural pathways but in the long run, our genes as well. “In short, we are -- perhaps quite literally -- shaping

the future as co creators of our own evolution” (IONS, 2007). We are capable of building a sustainable, compassionate, socially intelligent world.

*“It is not a thing,
Eden, but a pattern
of relationships, made
visible in conversation.
To live in Eden is
to live in the midst
of good relations,
of just relations
scrupulously attended
to, imaginatively
maintained through
time.” Altogether we
call this beauty.*

Barry Lopez

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