Emotional Intelligence: A Critical Competency for Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership style. The sample included 107 administrators, of which 39% were men and 61% were women, from four metropolitan community colleges in the Midwest. Participants were administered two instruments: the Genos Emotional Intelligence Inventory-Full Version and the Leadership Styles Questionnaire. Results indicated a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and democratic leadership style. Results also uncovered a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and laissez-faire leadership style. Although there was no significant difference in emotional intelligence or leadership style by gender, a predictive model of contributing factors of emotional intelligence subscales on overall emotional intelligence did reveal a gender-based difference. Findings of this study identified specific emotional intelligence competencies and leadership styles that, if integrated into leadership development programs, would enhance a leader’s overall emotional intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

Most would agree, “Leadership is a highly sought after and highly valued commodity” (Northouse, 2013, p. 1). However, defining leadership is difficult, as evidenced by the abundance of leadership philosophies. Many of these philosophies speak of ambiguous characteristics and vague generalities, lacking tangible practical application to the workplace. What is seen as effective leadership characteristics is presented within the context of leadership development, but often do not translate easily to leadership practices. This lack of clarity is further exacerbated through categorizing a leader’s behavior into numerous and divergent leadership styles.

There may be little consensus on a singular definition of a leader. However, most people can instinctively recognize those desired characteristics of a leader in others. They may not be able to articulate those characteristics, yet they know it when they see it, and they feel it when they experience it. That visceral reaction is in response to perceiving a leader’s heightened level of emotional intelligence.

Emotionally-intelligent leaders are able to connect emotionally with others so that they feel cared for, respected, and understood (Golemen, Boyatizis & McKee, 2004). The “authentic care or concern for others is a key value or quality for contemporary leaders to develop” (Guasta, 2012, p. 15). Emotions can provide valuable insights to leaders. They can offer a glimpse into the perspective of others, personifying fears, desires, and what they most cherish.

When exploring the personal attributes of a leader, people skills, communication skills, and relational skills are used to describe someone that displays emotional intelligence (Caruso, Salovey & Mayer, 2007). Those leaders with greater emotional intelligence are able to express emotions in a way that engages, motivates, and moves others toward a common goal (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Research (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; Groves, McEnrue & Shen, 2008; McEnrue, Groves & Shen, 2009; Richards, 2008) suggested that emotionally-intelligent leaders tend to be more influential and productive than their less emotionally-intelligent counterparts. Still, leadership development programs do not focus training on improving a leader’s emotional intelligence competencies (Grove et al., 2008; McEnrue et al., 2009; Richards, 2008). According to Dearborn (2002) traditional leadership development programs fail to produce sustainable changes in their leaders. It is only with a self-directed focus on enhancing an individual’s emotional intelligence that will ultimately make sustainable changes to one’s leadership repertoire.
program. Once these concerns are identified, they can be addressed.

Organizations committed to providing opportunities to enhance the emotional intelligence of their leaders, can benefit from a leadership development program rooted in an emotional learning system. This system is divergent from traditional leadership development programs in that it focuses on a systematic, sequential, yet flexible process to bring about change. The key factor in this system is that it must be self-directed. The process requires the learner to explore their own beliefs and behaviors, recognize current skill level, implement reflective and constructive thinking, employ tools that promote growth, and apply newly acquired skills within the environment where change is desired. The integration of the cognitive mind with that of the emotional mind is demonstrated through the intentional practice of emotional intelligence competencies (Nelson & Low, 2011).

As the demand for emotionally-intelligent leaders grows, so does the urgency for organizations to respond with leadership development programs that develop critical leadership skills of those from within the organization. However, creating a comprehensive leadership development program internally may be time and cost prohibited. Organizational training departments may not readily possess the level of expertise necessary to develop such a program. Finally, whether created internally or externally, it is important to ensure that program objectives and learning activities align with the culture and strategic goals of the organization.

Author Note

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