“Do We Know Emotional Intelligence When We See It? The Social Perception of Emotional Abilities”

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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, OR “EI,” defined as the ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions, has its roots in psychology. The 1995 best-seller Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ by psychologist and New York Times science writer Daniel Goleman propelled it into popular culture, but accurate tests to measure EI and its use as a predictor of job performance, leadership, and success have been lacking.

Current Tests For EI

Self-reporting survey is a test that provides the equivalent validity of a self-administered driving test. Even though an individual can recognize some attributes of their own emotional abilities, this method is inherently biased.

Ability tests are similar to an SAT test for college admission. EI ability tests are wrought with inherent problems, such as determining the “correct” answer to an emotional question.

Hillary Anger Elfenbein and her colleagues investigated and created a measurable tool to analyze emotional intelligence based on peer reporting and 360-degree feedback. They present the first scientific evidence of validity for this approach to measuring emotional intelligence in their paper.

Elfenbein and the research team crafted a unique testing methodology and conducted their research with MBA students who were working closely in teams in introductory organizational behavior courses at three different business schools. The students were asked to evaluate their teammates on key EI attributes, and the students’ previous employers were also asked to provide an evaluation of each student. The research team ensured that the real-world colleagues participating in the study had high levels of exposure with the students.

Due to the multi-institutional nature of the study, the research team was able to base their research on more than 2,500 individuals.

Results indicate significant consensus across observers about the EI of the student “targets.” The data also suggests preliminary correlation between observer-rated EI and other ability tests currently used to assess EI. These results could have a profound effect on workplace dynamics and the role of EI as a business team metric.

The 4 Branches of EI

- Perceiving Emotion: the ability to identify emotions in oneself and others
- Using Emotion: the ability to harness feelings toward cognition
- Understanding Emotion: the ability to use language and thinking to analyze emotion
- Management of Emotion: the ability to regulate one’s own emotions and to influence the emotional states of other people

Individuals exhibiting higher EI have been linked to better performance than their low EI counterparts, due to attributes such as greater motivation and perseverance. Additionally, individuals high in EI are perceived as more likable to their colleagues, who in turn reciprocate with greater assistance, leading to better performance.

Elfenbein and her colleagues have developed an affordable and accurate tool to easily measure an individual’s EI that can be used with current 360-degree feedback processes already employed by many companies as a performance evaluation metric.

Key Takeaways for Managers

- EI, or the ability of an individual to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions, is an important attribute linked to an individual’s performance and liking within an organization.
- Current testing methodology to measure EI lacks rigor (self-reported information) or can be expensive and potentially tough to define (EI ability tests).
- 360-degree feedback to assess EI is a significant and clear approach. This methodology should be utilized by evaluators who have frequent interaction with the individual to better understand nuanced behavior that impacts an individual’s EI.

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