

Social Intelligence at Work.

By Dr Gillian Stamp. Fourth National Relationship Conference, February 2007.

Social intelligence is the complement of the now well-known idea of emotional intelligence. For instance, empathy is an individual ability; rapport arises between people as they interact.

Emotional intelligence is about capacities within us as individuals to understand and manage our own emotions. Social intelligence is about what transpires as we connect, those ephemeral moments that emerge as we interact.

Current research in neurobiology shows that we have evolved to connect as much as to compete. When we see someone else smile or wipe away a tear, neurons in our own brain become active and 'mirror' the experience in what has been called 'empathic resonance'.

Just as we are learning the value of social intelligence in working together, so it can seem more and more difficult to practice. In both commercial and not for profit organisations, we work in a world that emphasises cost, evidence, measurement and seems often not to value the working relationships that are essential for delivery. At the same time we can all see that where trust – an expression of social intelligence – is depleted, delays, disputes, legal fees and costs rise and delivery suffers.

Social intelligence at work is not only about empathy, listening and concern, but also about the way we design and manage our working relationships. In both physical and social systems costs arise from friction; in physical systems they are minimised by oil, in social systems trust is the lubricant.

Social intelligence is the art of building, sustaining and managing the costs of those relationships through 'vigilant trust'. This is not trust as a 'warm fuzzy' but trust set within a framework of mutual expectations and a shared understanding that each will keep an eye on the other.

Social enterprise - one example of the value of vigilant trust is a project between an umbrella organisation for social enterprises (businesses with a social purpose) and three large private sector organisations. The idea was for managers from the private sector to spend time with social enterprises in order to widen their experience and provide 'business acumen'.

On the face of it the umbrella organisation and the social enterprises are the 'weaker' partners and at first, the businesses could see no reason to pay for the time consuming work of matching individuals with particular social enterprises. At this point there was a risk of mistrust – the social enterprises feeling "used" and the businesses feeling that the contribution of their managers was not being properly appreciated.

But the project could not continue unless the umbrella organisation could recoup its costs, so there was a need to convince the private sector businesses to value the broking work and to pay properly for it. The umbrella organisation realised that in the social enterprises it was providing an experience of leading in much greater complexity and nuance than is the case in most businesses. So the development gained from time spent in a social enterprise is in one sense invaluable, in another it is possible to put a price on it.

This clarity meant that the project could be reframed as an exchange between equal partners. Vigilant trust is needed to sustain that equality in the face of continued pressures from the private sector businesses. And the vigilant trust itself is sustained by the work of social intelligence.

The work of social intelligence is the work that keeps things working, the continuous mindfulness of people, purpose and processes that keeps them moving in the same direction at the same pace. Like the work of maintaining a household, a garden or a friendship, tending is often neither noticed nor recognised until something goes wrong. Only then is it seen as essential.

Because tending is usually unseen it is difficult to include in performance appraisals or competency frameworks and those who do this work of social intelligence well can be overlooked.

Historically tending has been the work of slaves, women and great leaders. For separate reasons each of these groups is especially alert to tiny differences in behaviour and/or to the way a task is progressing or slipping and they use that sensitivity to anticipate and often imperceptibility to shift direction.

Strengthening social intelligence – remembering that we have evolved to connect, we have touched on how we can design and tend working relationships and turn now to ways in which we can enhance the quality of our connections. Here are some that I have seen making a real difference as people work together:

- i) remembering that we all judge ourselves by our intentions while we judge others by their actions. So we are both harsher and more forgiving of ourselves than we are of others. And the clincher is that other people do the same, they judge us not by what we intended to do – or not to do – but by what we did or did not do.
- ii) guarding against what John Gottman calls The Four Horsemen; defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism and the most damaging of all, contempt - speaking from a superior plane.
- iii) remembering the ‘magic ratio’ - that for every negative interaction, five positive interactions are needed to restore the balance.
- iv) being aware of when to use ‘narrow’ and when to use ‘wide’ attention. We give narrow attention makes sense when we have a particular purpose – to check or explain a detail, to encourage someone to learn, to help them focus their energy. But when we want to see the whole we need to give wide attention so that we and those we are with can sit back, relax and allow their literal and metaphorical gaze to widen.

Contempt and agape – social intelligence at work can design and sustain relationships that make work a better place to be. Instead of low trust and even contempt there can be vigilant trust supported by clear mutual expectations and sustained by tending.

For many years I have been looking for the ‘opposite’ of the contempt that one sees so often I work places. One of the CEOs I work with suggested that it is agape - originally a classical Greek word to describe an intentional response to promote the well-being of others. There is also a Buddhist word for the same idea and in Christian theology it refers to unconditional love.

So we have evolved to be socially intelligent, philosophies have seen this for thousands of years, neurobiology is showing the reality in our bodies and brains and we have the opportunity to design our working relationships in such a way as to make the most of each other in the work we do together.