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The Importance of Interpersonal Skills

Emotional intelligence significantly impacts leadership success—and the bottom line.

We've heard it before, but it bears repeating. Studies say 90 percent of executive failures are attributable to interpersonal competencies—factors such as leading teams, developing a positive work environment, retaining staff, inspiring trust, and coping with change. The message is clear—if you're going to excel as a leader in any industry, you must master the “soft” skills.

In healthcare management, where the basic unit of business is the person, these skills are even more important. If physicians on your staff are spending time replaying a conflict in their minds, their energy is directed away from patient care. If you lack the skills to motivate your frontline employees to accept and optimally use new information technologies, your organization could be missing revenue opportunities or negatively affecting patient outcomes. Emotional intelligence—however “soft” it seems—has a direct effect on aspects of the organization as concrete as patient safety, clinical outcomes, and profitability. Following is a closer look at the five critical interpersonal competencies.

Knowing Yourself

It sounds easy, but in fact self-knowledge is challenging for many executives. To truly know ourselves, we must become aware of our blind spots, those situations we don't handle as well as

we should for optimal business performance. For some leaders this involves failure to listen to others' viewpoints, for some it involves making tough decisions with appropriate urgency, for others it concerns difficulty motivating their staff. Most people have a tendency to sweep their weaknesses under the rug. But this inevitably backfires because our weaknesses affect other people, whether we're aware of them or not. Self-knowledge enables you to recognize your weaker areas and take corrective action.

Maintaining Control

Most executives believe that they maintain control. But their staff may think differently! The key here is to be aware of when you are losing control. Do you pause and reflect when you are in territory that is difficult for you? Is your tendency to overreact or underreact? While the occasional outburst can be attributed to simply being human, if your pattern is more extreme—if you are perceived as becoming overly upset or shutting down—you are undermining your leadership effectiveness.

Maintaining Motivation

Motivation is a combination of optimism and perseverance. Studies have shown that we have a biologically based “set point” for optimism—some of us

look at the glass as half empty, some half full. While reality encompasses both extremes, taking the positive viewpoint has much more leverage for leaders. Optimism cascades down to those whom you are leading, enabling them to stay motivated and keep reaching for better outcomes. But when leaders are habitually pessimistic and primarily critical, followers become less innovative and more risk-averse. Perseverance is the second part of the motivation equation. You must demonstrate the ability to stay on course through thick and thin and set a clear vision of where the organization is headed in the long run.

Recognizing Others' Interests

Good leaders have the ability to take a win-lose situation and craft at best a win-win solution or at the very least, a tolerable outcome. To do this, you must know the needs and perspectives of the other parties. Only then can you create buy-in and get people behind your agenda, rather than attempting to control them, which will only alienate your followers. Remember the famous saying “I must know where my people are going so I can lead them.”

Communicating Flexibly

Flexible communication is the hallmark of great leaders. Leaders must be able to adjust their communication style according to the needs of the situation. This involves being aware of the effect your words have on different audiences. For example, leaders often underestimate the power of their emotions on subordinates, communicating with them in the same way they do with peers. But direct reports are less likely to push back, challenge, or even seek clarification from their leaders. This all too often leads to miscommunication and feelings of alienation,

which inevitably increase relational “static” and slow business results.

Building Interpersonal Skills

Good interpersonal skills are built over a lifetime. But there are several steps you can take to start building these skills faster and more effectively.

- *Read.* There are myriad articles and books on communication skills and emotional intelligence. Many of these provide strategies for real-world situations such as resolving conflict or motivating others. And the simple act of reading about emotional competencies will increase your awareness of behavioral “best practices.”
- *Talk with your team.* Teach those around you to give you open, honest feedback about your leadership style. Tell them what areas you are working on and enlist their help. You might not always get the whole truth, but just demonstrating that you are trying to improve your emotional intelligence can help your staff improve their performance as well.
- *Complete a formal evaluation.* Many executives benefit from a 360-degree evaluation of their interpersonal skills. These evaluations can be done using an online tool or through a live interview process with you and your primary stakeholders. Other tools such as personality type assessments can further round out your awareness of blind spots and opportunities for development.
- *Work with a coach.* External feedback can help you develop perspectives that you might not have previously

considered. A coach will work with you to identify the one area in which improving your skills would have the biggest effect on you, your team, and your organization. The coach will then help you identify strategies for improvement, implement the plan, and evaluate your progress.

Ultimately, your success in interpersonal competencies is determined by the experience of your stakeholders. No matter how effective a communicator you believe yourself to be, if your physicians, your board, and your management team do not feel the same, you are not maximizing your leadership potential. ▲

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