



## Conceptualising social intelligence: a key to Workplace success

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### **Abstract**

*The topic of social intelligence in the workplace is beginning to garner closer attention by researchers and theorists. The study of social intelligence addresses the stress of managing emotions when the work role demands that certain expressions be shown to customers. However, there has been no overarching framework to guide this work, and the previous studies have often disagreed on the definition and operationalization of social intelligence. The purposes of this article are as follows: to review and compare previous perspectives of social intelligence, to provide a definition of social intelligence that integrates these perspectives, to discuss social intelligence for work place success*

**Key words:** Social intelligence, collaboration, Intelligent Quotient

### **Introduction**

For a leader/manager to be successful, he needs to be multi-skilled. Intelligent Quotient (IQ) alone will not help a leader to succeed in the workplace. "You can be the most brilliant innovator, problem-solver or strategic thinker, but if you can't inspire and motivate, build relationships or communicate powerfully, those talents will get you nowhere", says Goleman (2006), pointing out how crucial social intelligence is for leaders. Leaders need to coordinate people with resources, to understand needs, motivations, boundaries, reactions, and limits, and none of this can be accomplished without keen social awareness. It is observed that some leaders with strong intellectual abilities seem to struggle to master social skills which will enable them to interact successfully with other people and get things done. A successful leader is the one who is adept at listening, communicating, motivating, and connecting with others.

### **Concept of Social Intelligence**

A simple description of Social Intelligence is: "the ability to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you". There are two literary meanings for the terms - 'social' and 'intelligence'. Social here means social relationships and interactions. Intelligence here means not possessing high Intelligent Quotient (IQ), but the ability to efficiently manage social relationships and interactions, because social interactions happen every time, everywhere in the workplace and in the society and this makes the life move smoothly. Therefore, both put together, the main characteristic features of Social Intelligence are one's efficiency and competence to express love, understanding and respect for others. It is a kind of intentional and planned social awareness and social responsibility.

### **Previous perspectives on social intelligence**

The term "social intelligence" is typically associated with the conception of intelligence developed by Edward



*Thorndike* (1920), a distinguished Columbia University psychologist and a recognized founder of connectionism, a movement within the cognitive sciences attempting to explain human abilities and cognitive skills as complex emergent functions arising from the recruiting of simple elements (i.e., neurons and neuronal groups) into complex networks (i.e., neuronal networks). In the early twentieth century, Thorndike separated three types of intelligence: (1) abstract (capturing what tests of intelligence measure); (2) mechanical (related to visualizing relationships among objects and understanding how the physical world works); and (3) social intelligence (reflective of the degree of success in functioning in interpersonal situations). Thorndike noted that interpersonal effectiveness was of vital importance for success in many fields, particularly leadership. "The best mechanic in a factory," he wrote, "may fail as a foreman for lack of social intelligence."

The notion of social intelligence was further developed in the 1920s and 1930s and referred primarily to the ability of getting along with people, but also to the ability to decode, understand, and manipulate the moods of others. In addition, during the 1920s and 1930s the first tests of social intelligence were developed. The George Washington Social Intelligence Test included, for example, tests of Judgment in Social Situations, Memory for Names and Face, Observation of Human Behavior, and Sense of Humor. Yet, the concept of testing for social intelligence was not uniformly accepted. Psychologist *David Wechsler*, for example, argued that social intelligence is a manifestation of general intelligence in its application to social situations.

After a number of empirical studies failed to show construct validity of the social intelligence concept as it was measured at the beginning of the twentieth century, work on social intelligence slowed down substantially. It was not until psychologist *Joy Paul Guilford* (1967) developed a representation of social intelligence through various abilities in the domain of behavioral operations (i.e., all behavioral-psychological acts) in the late 1960s that interest in the "essence" of the construct resurfaced. But the concept of social intelligence was defined differently, through a number of terms, such as behavioural or social cognition (by Maureen O'Sullivan), social competence (by Martin Ford and Marie Tisak), intra- and interpersonal intelligence (by Howard Gardner), practical intelligence (by Robert Sternberg), emotional intelligence, and dimensions of personality (by Hans Eysenck). Although in modern day there is great interest in the concept of social intelligence, there is no consensus definition and no unity with regard to assessment approaches.

Harvard professor, *Howard Gardner* (1983), was the first to put forward the idea that rather than being a single trait denoted by "IQ", human intelligence is composed of a range of interwoven competencies or distinct "intelligences". These can be broadly divided into Abstract Intelligence (symbolic reasoning), Practical Intelligence (getting things done), Emotional Intelligence (self-awareness and self-management), Aesthetic Intelligence (sense of music, art, design, form and literature), Kinesthetic Intelligence (whole-body skills, such as sports, dance or manoeuvring moving machinery, eg. flying planes or driving cars) and lastly, Social Intelligence (dealing with people). In essence, these different dimensions of



intelligence are like the different faces of a cube, each positioned at a different angle to the others but each coming together to form a whole. The most successful humans would obviously have the best-integrated combination of these multiple intelligences, although no living person would ever attain the ideal. The concept of multiple intelligences also suggests that these competencies are things that people can learn about and improve in, even in adulthood.

In the late 1980s, psychologists *John Kihlstrom* and *Nancy Cantor* systematized the literature on cognition, intelligence, and personality. Kihlstrom and Cantor derived the definition of social intelligence as a person's knowledge and expertise concerning oneself and the surrounding social world, and determinant of an individual's approach to solving problems of social life. They proposed to classify social knowledge into two categories: (1) declarative social knowledge including abstract concepts and specific memories, which can be subdivided into context-free semantic and context-dependent episodic memories; and (2) procedural knowledge including rules and skills (cognitive and motor), which are necessary for the translation of declarative knowledge into action. Examples of sets of declarative social knowledge are social concepts of personalities, situations and groups, and individuals' autobiographic memory. Examples of sets of procedural social knowledge are interpretive rules for understanding, processing, and representing social experience, such as establishing social causality; making inferences about other people's behaviors, emotions, and feelings; judging like-ability; implying trust; inducing and deducing responsibility; managing cognitive dissonance; and formulating and testing social hypotheses. According

to Cantor and Kihlstrom, social intelligence is evoked when a person is faced with the need to solve problems of social life, in particular when faced with life tasks, current concerns, or personal projects. These problems can either be formulated by people themselves or imposed on them from outside. Using this definition, social intelligence can be judged quantitatively (i.e., high or low) only through the eyes of the beholder, that is, from the point of view of the person whose life is in play.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, work on social intelligence became closely linked to research on autism. It has been argued that one of the main deficits in autism and other disorders on the autism spectrum is a lack of proper development of social intelligence or expertise in dealing with people. This line of work on social intelligence is related to the "theory of mind," which typically refers to a specific cognitive capacity to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one's own.

*Daniel Goleman*, (2006) in his earlier book on Emotional Intelligence, folded social intelligence into his model of emotional intelligence without making much of that fact, as have other theorists in the field. But latter felt that Social Intelligence had to be given due importance for building relationships. His ingredients of social intelligence were organized into two broad categories: social awareness, what we sense about others—and social facility, what we then do with that awareness.

*Karl Albrecht* (2006) defined social intelligence as a combination of abilities: the first is a basic understanding of people (ie. a kind of strategic social awareness) and the second is the skills



needed for interacting successfully with them. In other words, the ability to get along with others and to encourage them to cooperate with you. According to him, behaviours can be toxic, nourishing or somewhere in between. People exhibiting toxic behaviour have a low SI, can't connect effectively with others, and may even alienate or offend others. He describes toxic behaviours as "Social halitosis", "Social flatulence" and "Social dandruff" all of which, he noted, are variations on selfishness. He had identified five aspects of Social Intelligence – Situational awareness, Presence, Authenticity, Clarity and Empathy which can be used to measure Social Intelligence. Presence – is the external image or sense of self that is perceived by others, eg, confidence, self-respect or self-worth. Clarity – is the ability to express yourself clearly, explain concepts clearly and using language effectively, while persuading with ideas. Awareness – is the ability to understand social contexts that influence behaviour (ie. "read situations") and to choose the behavioural strategies most likely to be successful. Authenticity – is the way of behaviour which gives a perception of honesty. Empathy – is the ability to create a sense of connection with others and to encourage them to cooperate, rather than work against, as well as an appreciation for the emotions and experiences of others. He also discussed how SI can positively affect workplace diversity and advocates more ceremony and celebration in organisational life.

In their article Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership, *Goleman and Boyatzis*(2008) propose that "leading effectively is less about mastering situations-or even mastering social skill sets, than about developing a genuine interest in and talent for fostering positive feelings in the people whose

cooperation and support you need." They go on to define social intelligence as "a set of interpersonal competencies built on specific neural circuits (and related endocrine systems) that inspire others to be effective." What is new about their definition of social intelligence is its biological underpinning, by which they explain how to translate newly acquired knowledge about mirror neurons, spindle cells, and oscillators into practical, socially intelligent behaviours that can reinforce the neural links between a person and his or her followers.

### Social Intelligence Construct

*Daniel Goleman* describes Social Intelligence as a collection of abilities that enable us to be effective in managing our social interactions. In his view, "social intelligence" has two major sets of components: social awareness (*what we sense*) - and social facility (*what we do*).

**Social Awareness** refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner state, to understanding his or her feelings and thoughts, and complicated social situations. It includes:

1. *Primary Empathy*: feeling with others
2. *Attunement*: listening with full receptivity
3. *Empathetic Accuracy*: understating another person's thoughts feelings and intentions
4. *Social Cognition*: knowing how the social world works.

**Social Facility** builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective, interactions rather than simply sensing how another feels, or knowing what they think or intend. It includes:

1. *Synchrony*: the ability to respond smoothly to nonverbal cues



2. *Self-Presentation*: presenting ourselves effectively
3. *Influence*: shaping the outcome of social interactions
4. *Concern*: caring about others' needs and acting accordingly.

Tromso Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) developed by *Silvera, D.H., Martinussen, M. & Dahl, T. I. in 2001* is a measure of Social Intelligence in self-report format, designed for use in both experimental and survey research in both basic and applied settings. It is a 21 item format, addressing three factors namely Social Information Processing (SP), Social Skills (SS), and Social Awareness (SA) having 7 items each. This questionnaire is rated on a five point scale measuring very low, low, moderate, high and very high.

### **Social Intelligence and Workplace Success**

Daniel Goleman, in his book *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, explains how this mechanism works. "When you watch someone else perform, that elicits in the same arousal pattern in you. Kids do this all the time; this is how toddlers learn at such a voracious speed. They learn how to do virtually everything they do without being explicitly told. By watching others, people develop an internal map of the observed behavior. These mirrored arousal patterns become a kind of template, a map, that makes imitation so easy."

He also adds, "The rules for work are changing. We're being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other. This yardstick is increasingly applied in choosing who will be hired and

who will not, who will be let go and who retained, who passed over and who promoted." This means that to succeed with people in the over connected but under-empathic world of the future, we need to use all the tools we can, to really engage with each other. Social Intelligence is thus the lifeblood of an excellent leader.

Social Intelligence also has profound implications for education as well. Just as leaders can eject their team members from the mental state that fosters optimal performance, the same is true for the classroom. The teacher's attitude and caring are at least as significant as the technique and content of the teaching.

### **Social Intelligence: A Learnable Skill**

In practical terms, just being aware of the contagious nature of emotions helps one to act with greater social intelligence. Here are some strategies for employing and developing one's social intelligence:

1. **Awareness**: Awareness will allow individuals to better safeguard their own wellbeing. For example, if a person understands that anxiety is catching, he or she can become more alert to the anxious signals of others, and choose to resist the unconscious pull to become anxious as well. By resisting escalation of anxiety, he or she may help everybody around.

2. **Compliance**: A person who remains detached from other people will become isolated. When someone perceives other people like things, it not only is hurtful to others but it can be devastating to oneself. Someone who makes a little effort to greet others, to look them in the eye will feel more connected and, ultimately, healthier.



**3. Listening:** One may diffuse negativity by listening carefully to others, even when he or she doesn't feel like it. By listening with empathy it is possible to make others feel better, while broadening one's own horizons.

### Conclusion

Managers need to understand and connect with the people they're appointed to lead. High-tech professionals need to understand the social context and achieve their objectives by working from empathy. All adults, in their careers and personal lives, need to be able to present themselves effectively and earn the respect of those they deal with. Social intelligence can reduce conflict, create collaboration, replace bigotry and polarization with understanding, and mobilize people toward common goals.

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