

Guest Editorial 2

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Keywords: Healthcare, Leadership, Performance, Social intelligence

Scholars generally associate intelligence with cognitive, academic, or mathematical–logical competence. Scholastic Aptitude Tests, GPA, ACT, GMAT, GRE, and other admission tests are considered as surrogates of cognitive intelligence. Although academic institutions offer programs that are associated with this intelligence, literature on management generally acknowledges the inadequacy of cognitive intelligence as a predictor of one’s success in life or effective leadership. Literature on management and administration generally ignored the contribution of noncognitive intelligence, such as emotional, social, and cultural that are necessary for successful leadership in management and administration.

My comments here are on social intelligence (SI) that is essential for healthcare professionals (HCPs) who provide services to the patients. These professionals are trained to maintain and/or restore physical, mental, or psychological health of the patients. The thesis of this essay is that HCPs must have social intelligence to be effective in their jobs.

SI is defined as the ability to be aware of relevant social situational contexts; to deal with the contexts or challenges effectively; to understand others’ concerns, feelings, and emotional states; and to speak in a clear and convincing manner that involves knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to say it and to build and maintain positive relationships with others. This definition consists of four categories of abilities—situational awareness, situational response, cognitive empathy, and social skills. Situational awareness is associated with one’s ability to collect data and information for the diagnosis and formulation of problem(s), and situational response is associated with one’s ability to use this information to make effective decisions to attain desired results. These two basic abilities or competencies are needed for one’s success in life or effective leadership.

Cognitive empathy and social skills are needed for better understanding the feelings and needs of people, to communicate with them effectively, and to build and maintain relationships. These two abilities can help HCPs to remain aware of various social situational contexts which, in turn, help them to improve their situational response competence. These two abilities mediate the relationship between situational awareness and situational response. The theoretical basis of the four-category nomenclature of the SI construct is described as follows.

Situational Awareness

This is associated with one’s ability to comprehend or assess relevant HC situations. HCPs must be very strong in this ability as it is needed to collect relevant information for effective HC from the internal and external environments and make appropriate diagnosis of the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats in a timely manner. This ability enables a professional to formulate an HC problem correctly.

Situational Response

This is essentially the decision-making competence of HC professionals that is positively influenced by their problem formulation that took place before. One of the issues that is being discussed in the media is President Bush’s understanding of the Iraqi situation and his decision to send the US armed forces to topple Saddam Hussein and create a democratic system in that country. Because he made his decision on the basis of faulty information, the outcomes were fatal. It is possible for leaders to recognize or diagnose a situation or problem correctly, but they may not be able to make a decision that is likely to lead to desirable outcomes.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy is associated with one’s ability to recognize the thinking, feelings, intentions, moods, and impulses of people inside and outside the organization. Cognitive empathy should help to improve a leader’s awareness of the feelings and needs of supervisors, subordinates, and coworkers as well as people from outside the organization. This ability to connect with people should help to improve a leader’s social skills.

Social Skills

This is associated with one's ability or competence to speak in a clear and convincing manner that involves knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. Social skills also involve building and maintaining positive relationships, to act properly in human relations, to deal with problems without demeaning those who work with him or her, and to negotiate and manage conflict with tact and diplomacy. Social skills competence enables HC professionals to do their jobs effectively.

HCPs should also be encouraged to enhance their abilities through self-learning. Organizations should provide positive reinforcements for learning and improving their essential SI competencies needed for specific jobs. Organizations associated with HC should make appropriate changes in the organization design that involve creating flatter, decentralized, and less complex structures. They are also making appropriate changes in organizational culture that provides rewards for learning new competencies and for continuous questioning and inquiry. These changes in the organization design, culture, and positive reinforcements should encourage HCPs to acquire SI competencies needed for improving their own performance. Even though training is useful for improving supervisors' SI, there is a limit to what they can do to acquire the four competencies of SI. To deal with this problem, organizations may have to adapt the policy of recruiting healthcare providers with vision and charisma who are likely to be high on SI.

M. Afzalur Rahim

University Distinguished Professor of Management
Hays Watkins Research Fellow in Management
Editor, Applied Management Journal
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, KY 42101, USA
Cell: 270-320-7273
1988mgmt@gmail.com