

# The Hard Case for Soft Skills

by Shari Caudron

About five years ago, Annie McKee, managing director of the Center for Professional Development at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, was meeting with the executive board of a *Fortune* 50 financial-services firm. The topic? A proposed leadership-development program for the company's senior executives. Just as McKee finished explaining how the program would work and what skills would be developed, one board member jumped to his feet and started pounding his fists on the table. "This program sounds fine," he said. "But how do we teach our executives to *trust* one another?"

McKee was startled. "This wasn't the kind of place where you'd expect to find much tolerance for any discussion about emotion, but that was exactly what was happening," she says. Intuitively, this board member recognized that if the company were to be successful, its most senior leaders would not only need the right knowledge and experience, but they'd also have to be skilled at the softer side of management. Since that time, McKee has seen a dramatic change in the response of corporate executives to the notion of soft skills. "They're starting to get it," she says -- and it's about time.

Companies have offered soft-skills training to employees for years. But as every battle-scarred trainer knows, these programs are typically the first to go when budgets are cut. Given a choice between funding a course on computer skills or a course on active listening, corporate bean counters more willingly sign off on the computer course. Why? Because until recently, there had been no hard evidence that soft skills make a difference.

But as McKee's experience indicates, a new era is dawning in Corporate America and executives are starting to talk about the importance of such things as trust, confidence, empathy, adaptability and self-control. As a result, soft-skills training is gaining new respect. What accounts for this sea change in thinking? It can be summed up in two words: *emotional intelligence*.

---

**Like it or not, emotions are an intrinsic part of our biological makeup, and every morning they march into the office with us and influence our behavior.**

---

In 1995, Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and former *New York Times* reporter, published the international best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Bantam Books, 1995). In it, he brought together years of research to show that emotional intelligence -- which can loosely be described as a person's ability to manage his or herself and relate to other people -- matters twice as much as IQ or technical skills in job success. The book was so successful that last fall Goleman published a follow-up, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam Books, 1998), in which he revealed data from studies of more than 500 organizations that proved factors such as self-confidence, self-awareness, self-control, commitment and integrity not only create more successful employees but also more successful companies.

For the legions of soft-skills trainers who've long been stigmatized as training lightweights, Goleman's research is like manna from heaven. Finally there is hard data to confirm what they've known all along: Personality and character count on the job. Not only that, but there's also solid research to prove that the skills that contribute to emotional intelligence can be taught. Unlike IQ, which is a person's intellectual potential that is fixed at birth, patterns of emotional intelligence (or EQ) can be developed over time.

As a result of Goleman's research and all the publicity generated by his best-sellers, employers do appear to be more willing to invest in soft-skills development, especially at the higher management levels. But if you're a human resources manager who wants to make the case for developing the EQ of employees, you need to understand that traditional soft-skills training is just one piece of a long-term process that begins

with a thorough understanding of why emotional intelligence matters and ends with a commitment to ongoing coaching and mentoring of your employees.

### **Why do emotions matter?**

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, cultural wisdom has taught us that the workplace isn't a place for emotion. In the world of time clocks and balance sheets, reason and logic have been our guides, and intelligence is what we've honored. But all of us can probably name a brilliant high school classmate who never held a steady job or, conversely, a class clown who made his first million by age 25. This is because IQ is only one measure of performance, and it's a limited one at that.

Like it or not, emotions are an intrinsic part of our biological makeup, and every morning they march into the office with us and influence our behavior. On some level, we've always known that the ability to understand, monitor, manage and capitalize on our emotions can help us make better decisions, cope with setbacks and interact with others more effectively. But thanks to the work of Goleman and other researchers, we now have hard data to prove it. Consider these statistics revealed in Goleman's book:

- Research on 181 jobs at 121 companies worldwide showed that two out of three abilities vital for success were emotional competencies such as trustworthiness, adaptability and a talent for collaboration.
- According to a study of what corporations seek when they hire MBAs, the three most desired capabilities are communication skills, interpersonal skills and initiative -- all of which are elements of emotional intelligence.
- Emotional intelligence matters in surprising places such as computer programming, where the top 10% of performers exceeded average performers in producing effective programs by 320%, and the superstars at the 1% level produced an amazing 1,272% more than average. Assessments of these top performers revealed that they were better at such things as teamwork, staying late to finish a project and sharing shortcuts with coworkers. In short, the best performers didn't compete -- they collaborated.
- Studies of close to 500 organizations worldwide indicate that people who score highest on EQ measures rise to the top of corporations. Among other things, these "star employees" possess more interpersonal skills and confidence than "regular employees" who receive less favorable performance reviews.

---

**Studies of close to 500 organizations worldwide indicate that people who score highest on EQ measures rise to the top of corporations.**

---

In fact, enough research has been conducted in the area of EQ that a standardized testing instrument can actually determine an individual's EQ rating or score, similar to the IQ method of determining a person's level of intelligence. The instrument, known as the BarOn EQ-i, was developed by Dr. Reuven Bar-On, the person who coined the term "EQ" more than 12 years ago. The test, which is the first scientific measure of emotional intelligence, provides a measure of one's overall emotional intelligence and covers 15 different emotional-skill areas found to be most important in successfully coping with life's demands. These factors are clustered into various categories such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management and general mood.

The BarOn EQ-i, a written test that's available through Toronto-based Multi-Health Systems, Inc., contains 133 short multiple-choice items, and is computer-scored so that respondents' results can be

compared with a multicultural normative database of the more than 18,000 people who've been tested to date worldwide.

Additional assessments conducted by Multi-Health Systems further support the theory that emotional intelligence is an important factor in successful on-the-job performance. Their research includes:

- A study of 1,171 U.S. Air Force recruiters showing that the best performing recruiters were those who scored high on assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relations, problem solving and optimism.
- A study of 1,000 sales personnel from a large U.S.-based international company demonstrating that the characteristics most predictive of sales success were assertiveness, empathy, happiness, emotional self-awareness and problem-solving skills. Nothing else, including gender, education, geographic area, age or hours worked came as close to predicting success as did these emotional competencies.

And although hard data isn't available to show to what degree training and behavior modification activities improve an individual's EQ-i rating, it could be significant. According to Bar-On, "the measurement of emotional intelligence in the workplace is the first step toward improving it. By understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your teams, you can systematically work toward increasing the skills that count."

But even without these hard numbers, there's been a growing awareness of the importance of soft skills because the corporate environment has changed so drastically. As layers of middle management disappear and senior management trims down, organizations are demanding that people work faster, cheaper and smarter. Corporate cultures have gone from vertical to horizontal, and collaborative partnerships are replacing the old command-and-control managerial hierarchy. In this increasingly team-driven and intimate workplace, leaders and followers interact more closely and deficiencies in personality become clearer. Simply stated, we need these soft skills just to get along with each other.

---

**In an increasingly team-driven workplace, leaders and followers interact more closely, and deficiencies in personality become clearer.**

---

The tight job market also plays a part. "The real key to keeping good people is the kind of environment that leaders create," explains Lee Kricher, vice president of leadership and workforce development for Development Dimensions International in Pittsburgh. "As a result, there's a much keener awareness among managers that recognizing emotions in others and handling relationships is key to creating the kind of environment that employees will thrive in."

Kate Cannon, president of Kate Cannon and Associates in Minneapolis -- and founder of one of the first corporate emotional intelligence efforts in the country -- agrees with Kricher. "Because of the all the instability in the marketplace, employees are taking the need for emotional connection that they used to have with their companies and projecting that onto their leaders and managers. To be effective, those managers have to become more emotionally intelligent."

But nothing has impacted the willingness of companies to invest in soft skills development more than the fact that there are now studies to show that this stuff really works. "There's more empirical data coming out all the time to show that such skills as listening and building consensus really do affect the bottom line," explains Hendrie Weisenger, PhD, author of *The Power of Positive Criticism* (Amacom, 1999). "The soft skills have become the hard skills."

**How do you develop emotional intelligence at work?**

Because emotional intelligence can have such a significant impact on the bottom line, it makes sense that companies would be willing to help employees develop the competencies that contribute to EQ.

Unfortunately, many employers may be going about it the wrong way.

"What's shocking is that although there's a lot of literature about what is needed to make long-lasting behavioral changes, a lot of people haven't taken it seriously," explains Murray Dalziel, global managing director of organization effectiveness and management development services at the Hay Group in Philadelphia. Instead, when it comes to developing EQ, he says the training industry is full of nice packaging, but many of these efforts are spray-and-pray approaches. "They spray employees with a concept, and pray that it will make a difference," he explains.

---

**Learning the skills that contribute to emotional intelligence can't be done in a one-shot training course.**

---

Dalziel, whose company has recently formed an alliance with Goleman to create leadership-development programs based on the theories of emotional intelligence, explains that learning the skills that contribute to emotional intelligence can't be done in a one-shot training course. This is why, although emotional intelligence has given weight to soft skills development, they aren't the same thing.

How do they differ? Skills training is typically very narrow and focused. Courses may be built around a specific skill such as active listening, problem solving or team building. To develop emotional intelligence, however, companies must focus on the broader parameters of organizational and behavioral change. While skills training is still an important part of the process, companies need to help employees understand what skills and competencies are most important on the job, how those competencies develop -- or not -- over time and how those competencies work together to create emotional intelligence.

More specifically, to develop the kind of long-lasting behavioral changes that have an impact on the bottom line, Cannon says that companies must:

- Understand what competencies employees need for the organization to meet its objectives.
  - Establish the outcomes that are desired from the development effort.
  - Assess the current EQ level of workers using such things as 360-degree feedback.
    - Provide training in specific competencies.
- Create ways for employees to develop and improve their competency level on an ongoing basis through such things as coaching.

This last piece -- ongoing support -- is particularly important because developing emotional intelligence takes work and practice just like any behavior modification effort. Just as courses on dieting aren't enough for people to lose weight, and classes about lung cancer aren't enough for them to quit smoking, training on emotional competencies isn't enough for employees to become emotionally intelligent. Instead, employees need a plan and a lot of practice and support.

---

**To get bottom-line benefits from soft-skills development, employers have to be willing to commit for the long haul.**

---

Although most EQ development programs center around soft-skills training, the broader focus on behavior and organizational change means that EQ efforts typically take much longer and are more involved than your average skill development course. To get the bottom-line benefits from soft-skills development, employers have to be willing to commit for the long haul.

"In one day of training, I can provide an awareness of what emotional intelligence is and why it matters," explains Cannon. "In three days, people can be taught specific skills that can be applied right away. But it takes five days of training plus a lot of ongoing support for people to understand their own emotional makeup, learn the necessary skills, practice the new behaviors and experience the kind of transformation that impacts the company."

Annie McKee agrees that companies have to be willing to commit the time necessary for the new soft skills to take hold. "After all, we're talking about patterns of behavior that are engraved in one's brain," she says. "These patterns are difficult to learn and relearn."

But now that there are hard data to show these patterns can be learned and that companies do stand to benefit, it's likely more employers will be willing to commit to the development process. Soft-skills training is no longer the Rodney Dangerfield of the training world. Soft skills have come of age.