On-the-Job Training for Emotional Competence

During the early stages of their careers, leaders tend to focus on developing their technical and analytical skills, paying little attention to their capacity to recognize and manage their own emotions and those of others. This can hurt them later in their careers. But emotional competence can be nurtured, and although formal programs are a good starting point, learning from everyday opportunities at work is most effective.

For leaders, success or failure often comes down to how they handle challenges such as encounters with difficult colleagues, conflicts within a team, setbacks in projects, downturns in the business cycle, or the aftermath of a merger. Effectively managing such stressful events requires emotional competence—the capacity to recognize and manage your own feelings and those of others. Emotional competence is a critical factor that separates high performers from also-rans in leadership positions ranging from first-line manager to CEO. For executives, insufficient development of emotional competence can be a major contributor to their careers going off track.

Yet during the first decade of their careers, leaders typically focus on developing technical and analytical skills while neglecting their skills in emotional awareness and management. As they assume more visible roles, this neglect becomes increasingly dangerous—for themselves and for their organizations. Especially in the aftermath of September 11, leaders find themselves in the challenging position of providing guidance and support to others while also coping with substantial levels of personal uncertainty and stress. In this environment, leaders’ resiliency, adaptability, and compassion—all largely dependent on their emotional competence—
coaches, and facilitators, it’s clear that structured programs offer a powerful starting point for enhancing self-awareness and social awareness. Such programs offer an environment of anonymity and safety, which allows participants the psychological space to be vulnerable and to become more self-aware. In this context the value of candid assessment data and expert help in interpreting those data can be maximized.

In contrast, efforts to develop competencies that involve self-regulation and a variety of new behaviors are more amenable to on-the-job learning because they require practicing and reflecting on the new behaviors. Such personal learning takes place in relationships at work, as leaders seize everyday opportunities to practice new behaviors and get feedback from colleagues they trust.

Leaders who are able to leverage work experiences to enhance self-awareness, self-management, empathy, and critical social skills create a personal infrastructure that supports their continuous learning. (See “Creating a Personal Learning Infrastructure,” on page 5.) First, they develop a personal learning agenda based on a thorough understanding of their emotions, strengths and weaknesses, personal values, and motivations. (This agenda is often completed in an off-site program or coaching engagement.) Then they use their enhanced self-awareness to take action, including taking risks, practicing new skills, and seeking feedback on the impact of their new behaviors. Finally, they maintain learning as a priority—even in the midst of organizational turbulence—by creating learning partnerships that provide encouragement, guidance, and feedback.

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GETTING TO KNOW YOU

According to psychologist Daniel Goleman and other researchers, self-awareness is the foundation on which other emotional competencies are built. (See “Emotional Competence Defined,” on page 5.) Self-awareness involves understanding your own strengths and limitations—especially your fears and insecurities—on an emotional, not just intellectual, level. Participants in formal programs say that certain aspects of the programs are especially useful for and conducive to developing greater self-awareness:

- A safe and trusting environment. Participants don’t bring their personal agendas or judge one another, and they hold confidences.
- Opportunities for disclosure. Participants can be vulnerable and honest about their own shortcomings.
- Honest and caring feedback.
- Frequent opportunities to reflect.
- Support from facilitators, other participants, and colleagues.

Let’s look at an example of how an off-site leadership development program can help a leader delve into the self-awareness that is crucial to the further and ongoing honing of emotional competence.

Joe is the vice president for sales and marketing of a global consumer products company. At the start of his leadership development program, Joe was confident that he understood his upsides and downsides, as a result of a similar development effort he had undergone on the job. But the on-the-job program had been managed by someone from his company’s human resource department; Joe had been asked to assess himself on his leadership style, then he had received feedback from his direct reports. Joe’s vice president position was a newly created one that resulted from a company reorganization. He was eager to receive the feedback because he thought it would help ensure his success.
The on-site feedback process helped Joe understand that the areas in which he needed development included paying more and better attention to his staff members’ career development, following through on commitments, and slowing down his thought processes enough to allow others to catch up with him. Armed with this knowledge, Joe thought he was prepared for any feedback he might receive during the off-site program.

But Joe was surprised by the emotional impact of the feedback he received, even though the new feedback largely confirmed what he already knew. By learning more about how he affected others, he deepened his self-awareness. For example, he learned that his lack of attention to the development of his staff members’ careers made them feel that he was uninterested in their performance primarily in terms of how that performance affected his own recognition and ability to climb the corporate ladder. His staff members didn’t think he took a genuine, personal interest in them. Likewise, his tendency to move quickly from idea to idea—a quality he viewed as a strength that energized others—was viewed by some as an inability to implement and a failure to develop a thorough understanding of the business.

What was different? Why was the internal process less effective at facilitating awareness and motivation to modify behaviors? The conditions that bring about powerful learning were absent. Direct reports were asked to share feedback without anonymity. They were uncertain about how their feedback would be received, so they softened the message. The feedback was one-way, and Joe was on the hot seat. He wasn’t given enough opportunity to reflect on the data with the help of a knowledgeable and objective guide. In the first process, a premium was placed on civility and a calm exchange of information. As a result, Joe developed an intellectual, “neck up” understanding of his leadership style. But the richness of detail and insight that the externally facilitated process offered resulted in a more visceral, emotional, “neck down” experience. Before the off-site program, Joe was aware of his downsides but didn’t internalize their impact. He considered them trade-offs for what he viewed as his strengths—his quickness, strategic and creative thinking, verbal skills, executive presence, and interpersonal skills.

Joe had made superficial behavioral changes in response to the internal program, but he hadn’t reflected deeply on the behaviors and how they were linked to his value system and who he was as a person. Once he began to consider how the feedback aligned with his core personality and value system, his psychological armor was pierced at a much deeper and more personal level. For the first time, Joe began to appreciate and fully internalize the impact that his style had on others.

Emotional competence is a set of learned capabilities that results in outstanding performance at work. A number of researchers have developed ways to define and measure emotional competence. The work of psychologist Daniel Goleman, particularly in his books Working with Emotional Intelligence and Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence (the latter co-written with Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee), is especially useful for leaders who are striving to enhance their emotional competence. In addition, the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations summarizes best practices for developing emotional competence on its Web site, at eiconsortium.org.

Goleman and his colleagues define emotional intelligence as the capacity to recognize and effectively manage one’s own feelings and those of others. He has identified twenty-one emotional competencies that underlie emotional intelligence. They are grouped into four clusters: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management. Emotional competencies are practical skills that can be learned. In this article, the term emotional competence describes the overall set of specific competencies.
Joe’s initial emotional reaction to his deeper level of self-awareness was not unusual. Achieving greater self-awareness and experiencing the power of empathy can be overwhelming at first. But leaders can relieve some of the anxiety that accompanies self-discovery by sorting out their key strengths and a few critical areas in which ongoing development would best leverage their leadership. Creating a personal learning agenda and identifying specific development goals can help leaders focus. In the absence of clear personal goals and under the press of immediate work demands, emotional learning often gets relegated to the back burner.

With a clearer vision in mind, Joe was able to focus on three goals, all of which were related to fostering his emotional competence: being less impatient with others, being more demonstrative in understanding and responding to the needs of others, and energizing and inspiring others to see and share his vision for the business. All three goals went deeper than the three developmental areas Joe had previously identified.

**OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK**

Unlike learning an emerging technology or a new financial tool, developing emotional competence requires an ongoing investment in self-discovery and self-exploration. Clarifying one’s personal values, attitudes, and habits is a prerequisite for understanding others. Solidifying this learning requires practicing new and unfamiliar behaviors over time, reflecting on these new behaviors and their consequences, and soliciting feedback and encouragement. It’s not an easy job; nor is it accomplished in a short period of time.

Fortunately, leaders can make effective use of the developmental power of everyday opportunities. These routine events are prime venues for enhancing self-awareness and refining the ability to respond effectively to the predictable—and sometimes not so predictable—challenges faced at work. The challenges cited at the beginning of this article—encounters with difficult colleagues, conflicts within a team, setbacks in projects, downturns in the business cycle, and the aftermath of a merger—are prime examples of opportunities to develop emotional competence.

The stumbling block for most leaders as they pursue these everyday opportunities is that even though they leave off-site development programs filled with excitement and enthusiasm, they inevitably lose momentum. Sometimes daily work demands simply overshadow their ability to focus on development. Sometimes leaders don’t receive the same level of support they experienced during the program. They don’t get ongoing feedback on their progress or acknowledgment, let alone reinforcement, of their small successes. Too often, achieving day-to-day business outcomes is viewed as separate from or conflicting with the development of emotional competence. Shifting this mind-set is an important first step toward sustaining efforts to achieve these development goals.

Part of this shift involves expanding the concepts of practice, feedback, and support. It can be compared to baseball batters who want to hit for a high average. They’re unlikely to achieve this goal by swinging for the fences in every at bat. They make the most of every opportunity and savor even the small successes that increase their average, such as a bloop single. As batters who take this approach develop into better hitters, the home runs often just come naturally. This is an important analogy to consider for leaders, who typically look to hit a home run in every situation. In the business world home runs are what tend to be rewarded, whereas there is less appreciation for smaller accomplishments. The variety of daily interactions at work—ranging from resolving business problems to coaching a direct report to addressing an employee performance issue—all offer at bats and chances to improve a leader’s emotional competence success average.

The importance of focusing on everyday opportunities is underscored by the experience of a leader we’ll call Jerry.

After attending an off-site leadership development program, Jerry, a midlevel manager, understood that his behaviors were deeply ingrained and that he would have to implement some fundamental changes to move out of his comfort zone. Jerry had received strong and extensive feedback that he didn’t listen well and wasn’t open to other points of view. He learned that others saw his management style as self-absorbed, which they attributed to extreme competitiveness.

He learned that he lacked an essential leadership skill: the ability to influence others, which, first, requires understanding others’ needs and perspectives. To improve that skill, Jerry needed to practice paying attention to others’ feelings. And to do that effectively, he needed to understand his own emotions and how his unhelpful expression of those feelings was interfering with his ability to sense and respond to others. Jerry began to appreciate how self-awareness and self-management were the initial keys to unlocking his leadership potential. With prodding, he acknowledged that each day he had opportunities to practice influencing and demonstrating empathy. His days were filled with interactions with bosses, peers, and direct reports, and all these exchanges offered opportunities to practice new behaviors.

At the same time, Jerry was keenly aware that he needed support from others in the company who...
Coaching is considered an essential jump-start experience for developing emotional competence. But what specific coaching practices are used to facilitate leaders’ development of emotional competence? To answer this question, research was conducted on four CCL programs—two of which involve classroom-based instruction and two of which involve one-on-one coaching and assessment.

Information from twenty-five major coaching engagements was collected and analyzed, along with the answers to end-of-program and follow-up questions from classroom programs during the past four years and personal reflections from coaches and facilitators who were engaged in helping leaders develop emotional competencies.

Two of the programs emphasized developing self-management and social skills such as managing conflict, whereas the other two placed more emphasis on deepening self-awareness and the personal factors that shape one’s ability to self-disclose and build trusting relationships.

All four of the programs used assessment tools and feedback processes to address the four emotional competence clusters—self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management. Participants were asked to reflect on the meaning and implications of 360-degree feedback and to establish personal development goals.

As noted earlier, persistent work demands and a fast-paced, results-oriented business culture can easily push a personal learning agenda out of the picture. The challenge for leaders is to re-create their day-to-day work lives the critical elements of an off-site learning experience that enables risk taking, encouragement, and useful feedback. By doing so leaders can establish a learning support system—an essential ingredient of staying focused on active development.

Most important, experiencing success and receiving positive reinforcement from others provides the best incentive for sustaining personal growth and for modeling and facilitating this process for others.

### STEPS TO TAKE

What steps can leaders take to develop emotional competence? A good starting point is to find out what opportunities the organization offers, such as off-site development programs, ongoing coaching, and periodic feedback. Knowing what is available enables leaders to seize opportunities they may have previously overlooked.

Leaders also should become purposeful about developing trusting alliances with their bosses, peers, and subordinates who can offer timely encouragement and feedback. These alliances often evolve into reciprocal learning partnerships in which both individuals give and receive encouragement and feedback.

Leaders may want to consider whether the organization’s culture encourages risk taking and learning. If in the process of creating a personal learning infrastructure leaders discover that it is difficult or awkward to build such alliances at work, they may have to broaden their pool of learning partners to include outsiders.

Developing emotional competence is inextricably tied to developing a learning infrastructure. As leaders create such an infrastructure, they naturally increase their self-awareness, find opportunities to practice self-regulation and critical social skills, and develop alliances that provide valid feedback and encouragement. Periodic feedback and reassessment enable leaders to determine whether they are enhancing their awareness of their own and others’ emotions and motivations, and the extent to which they are improving in the areas of self-management, empathy, and targeted social skills.

As leaders continue to follow this path, their learning agendas are likely to change. Leaders may also become models for others or take an interest in how they can motivate others to develop their own self-awareness and other critical emotional competencies. In their roles as creators and stewards of organizational culture, leaders might ask how they can create opportunities for others to engage in personal learning and development. Once leaders are on the way to becoming emotionally competent, they realize that this question is too critical to leave unanswered.