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Hard Science and Soft Interpersonal Skills

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction: Movies and Interpersonal Skills

Carl Carter is a professional photographer who once worked as a grip in movies filmed in New York City. The job of the grip is to install the tracks upon which cameras are mounted and also performs other manual labor as needed on a movie set. Carl was hired many times by both Woody Allen and Sidney Lumet, directors and movie makers who filmed most of their movies in New York City. Allen and Lumet made movies that were very different. Allen is famous for light, romantic comedies, such as *Annie Hall*, *Bullets over Broadway* and *Everybody says I Love You*. Sidney Lumet's movies are much darker and more dramatic. Among his most famous works are *Twelve Angry Men*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Serpico*.

Although their movies were different, according to Carl, their working methods and interpersonal skills were very similar. Both worked their film crews extremely hard and were highly efficient in completing their films on time and under budget. Carl says he was also surprised to find that both directors went out of their way to learn the names of individual crew members. Carl remembered that when either Allen or Lumet asked him to perform a task they always used his name and preceded the request with "Mr. Carter would you please...". Carl said this type of consideration was a distinct contrast with most other directors with whom he worked. Other directors seldom bothered to learn crew member's names and were brusque and impatient when issuing commands. Carl observed that although both drove their crews as hard as any directors for which he had ever worked, they were revered by their crews. Consequently, the crews worked tirelessly without complaint, often until exhaustion for both directors and there was a real sense of community and camaraderie on the sets of both directors. Carl says even now he is amazed at how much a small amount of interpersonal interaction from the film's leader generated in terms of loyalty and hard work on the part of the staff.

Science and Interpersonal Skills

A growing body of research supports the contention that interpersonal skills are crucial to the exercise of effective leadership (Fernandez-Araoz 2001; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002; McCauley 2004; McDowelle & Buckner, 2002; Northouse 2004). An important development for school leaders is a burgeoning research base in the hard sciences that describes how these skills can be effectively applied. Much of this research has been presented in highly accessible and comprehensible formats by science writers and in some cases by the researchers themselves. Scientific advances in neuroscience, cognitive processing and emotional intelligence are now available to the non-scientist in lively, interesting books that clearly explain the scientific theories that undergird specific interpersonal skills and also describe how these skills can be applied to specific leadership tasks. Examples of this type of accessible research are:

- (1) C.S. Jacob's book, *Management rewired: Why feedback doesn't work and other surprising lessons from the latest brain research*. This book applies, in very specific cases, research on neuroscience to specific aspects of leadership and management.

(2) The Heath brothers, *Made to stick: Why some ideas die and others survive*, which describes effective methods of communication that will be remembered and acted upon by those with whom we communicate.

(3) Robert Cialdini's *Persuasion: The psychology of influence*, which has been available for several years but each new edition has been updated with the latest research. Cialdini provides a comprehensive review of effective techniques in persuasion and the research that supports these techniques.

(4) Thaler and Sunstein's book, *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*, describes another important aspect of both communication and persuasion, the framing of options so that people will make the decisions we believe to be in their best interest. Thaler and Sunstein also plainly describe the research supporting their assertions.

(5) Finally, Goleman has written several books on various aspects of Emotional Intelligence (EQ). His books as well as *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence* written with Boyatzis and McGee, are faithful renditions of the research on Emotional Intelligence.

Hard Science

Claims made about the importance of interpersonal skills are based on rigorous, empirical research (Fernandez-Araoz 2001; Goleman 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McGee, 2002 ; McCauley 2004; Sousa 2003; Wong, & Law, 2002). Although interpersonal skills are often called *soft skills*, the research conducted to illuminate the importance and exercise of these skills is *hard science*. This research can be categorized as two types: (a) Neurological science conducted with technology such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) that physically depicts how the brain works; and (b) rigorously controlled behavioral experiments that focus on the role of the emotions in decision-making.

Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging

When we use our brain and there is mental activity, the brain uses oxygen and glucose to fuel that activity. fMRI technology is able to track the expenditure of oxygen and glucose and, therefore, identify specific areas of the brain associated with specific events and activities. For example, fMRI shows that the areas of the brain called the amygdala are associated with emotions and that the amygdala interacts with other areas of the brain such as the prefrontal cortex to make decisions.

Behavioral Experiments

An excellent example of the function of the amygdala is related by Dylan Evans (2001) in *Emotion: The Science of Sentiment*. He describes behavioral experiments in which strangers are paired together and then asked to note emotional cues such as eye contact, observation of facial expressions and body language to ascertain whether they trust each other. People who have suffered some trauma to the amygdala were not as able to make good decisions about who to trust as those with fully functioning amygdala.

Social Proof and Persuasion

Social Proof is the tactic of using people of similar traits to persuade people like themselves to adopt

a targeted behavior. Mary Kay Cosmetics is an excellent example of the use of social proof. Mary Kay Cosmetics franchises women who may be housewives or working women to first endorse the cosmetics by using them and then to sell the cosmetics to people in similar circumstances. Research shows that people are more easily persuaded by people similar to themselves (Cialdini 2007). Cialdini lists social proof as one of the six basic laws of persuasion in his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. The six laws of persuasion described by Cialdini have been proven to be successful over time and are supported by research in human behavior. Social proof is one of the laws. The others are:

(2) Liking: People can be persuaded by those they like. Two proven ways to make people like you are (a) establish mutual interests and (b) give people praise.

(3) Reciprocity: If you give people something they are likely to be willing to give something back. An example of reciprocity is the practice of charities sending personalized address labels to potential donors. The use of the personalized address labels doubles the favorable response rates for charities that use them.

(4) Consistency: This persuasion law might also be called the law of commitment. When people commit to something in writing or in front of witnesses they are more likely to follow through on the act they have pledged to do. Weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers are examples of the power of public commitment.

(5) Authority: People are easily persuaded by experts. People tend to believe people who can demonstrate expertise. Hence the use of experts to endorse all kinds of products from basketball sneakers (Be Like Mike) to motor oil (If it's good enough for Dale Junior, it's good enough for me.).

(6) Scarcity: We want things we think we cannot have. If a product is scarce, people's desire for the product increases, hence the craze around Christmas for toys like the *Tickle Me Elmo* doll in recent years. When Christmas shoppers find they are difficult to obtain the demand for the product grows exponentially.

Emotional Intelligence

The concept of Emotional Intelligence was introduced in 1990 by Salovey and Mayer. The concept is proving to be extremely helpful in illuminating certain leadership skills particularly the interpersonal skills of leadership (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; Carter 1998; Damasio 1999; LeDoux 1996; Mayer, Salovey, & Carusom 2000; Pinker 1997). This research is clear that:

(1) Emotions are essential for effective decision-making.

(2) Emotions drive memory, learning and motivation.

(3) Emotions are an essential part of cognition rather than a separate process.

The New York Times columnist, David Brooks (2007) eloquently observes, "Emotional engagement is the essence of information processing and learning." (p.18).

Building upon these findings that demonstrate the importance of the emotions in decision-making and

information processing, there is now strong support in the leadership literature for the role emotional intelligence plays in leadership (Coetzee & Schaap, 2004; Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006; Leban & Zulauf, 2004; Srivastava & Bharamanaikar, 2004; Wong & Law, 2002). Among the many leadership skills in which emotional intelligence plays a key part are relationship building, reading and understanding people, using emotions wisely and personal and professional development of employees. EQ is also an essential part of the interpersonal skills of communication, conflict resolution, trust building, persuasion, and motivation.

Creating an Emotionally Healthy Leadership Environment

Emotional Intelligence can aid the emotionally aware leader in developing a context and an environment in which bias and irrationality can be modulated and eventually overcome. A study of the emotional intelligence research offer six principles of emotional intelligence that draws on emotional realities and common needs found in human behavior.

SIX PRINCIPLES OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

- (1) People's emotions provide stronger motivation than rationality.
- (2) People have a desire for individualized attention and consideration.
- (3) People have a desire for recognition of legitimate accomplishment
- (4) People have a strong need to achieve and win.
- (5) People strive for affiliation and belonging.
- (6) People need positive interactions with other people.

The emotionally aware leader will keep these principles in mind as he or she attempts to create a context and an environment in which to deal with natural tendencies toward bias and irrationality. By demonstrating individual attention and care for members of the school community and recognizing their genuine achievements the leader will create an emotionally healthy environment in which bias and irrationality can be minimized. As stated before "emotional engagement is the essence of information processing and learning." (Brooks 2007, p.18). When school leaders become emotionally engaged with individual members of the school community, they can break down barriers of bias and irrationality and replace those barriers with bonds of relationship and trust. Relationships can in turn allow more open and trusting communication.

Framing

This concept is described by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008) in their excellent book, *Nudge*. The nudge of the title refers to the skill of nudging people toward the behavior you want them to adopt.

Framing is the presentation of options in such a way that the decision-maker selects the option that the framer believes is the best option. For example, a doctor who believes that a patient should undergo a specific surgical procedure can tell the patient that 10 out of 100 patients die from the operation. This will probably not encourage the patient to rush to go under the knife. On the other hand, if the patient is

told that ninety percent of this type of surgery is successful, chances are greater the patient will opt for that procedure. All decisions are framed in some way. The choice for the leader is whether to be involved in that framing. No decision is frame-neutral. Often we are not aware that decisions have been framed because we have become accustomed to the manner in which we are presented the choice. For example, astute cafeteria managers know that the placement of certain foods in a certain manner and certain location makes the selection of that food more likely. We are not aware of the frame but it exists.

Business is very aware of the art of framing. Thaler and Sunstein describe how in the 70's retail merchants decided to charge more to customers who used credit cards. The credit card companies did not like this decision by retail merchants but were unable to change it. So the credit card companies decided to reframe the situation for potential customers considering whether to use a credit card. The credit card companies asked the retail merchants to list the credit card price as the *normal price* while the cash price would be listed as a *discount*. This frame allowed customers to believe they were not paying extra for the credit card but simply getting a discount for cash. This frame made it more likely they would use their credit card. Although some customers might opt to use cash to save money, many others did not object to paying the *normal rate*.

Thaler and Sunstein stress that all decisions are framed in one way or another. Even the smallest details can nudge people towards a particular decision. While there are serious ethical concerns raised by the framing of decisions, the question for the school leader is do they wish to participate in the framing of questions presented to their associates.

Summary

The research continues to support the importance of interpersonal skills in the exercise of school leadership (McCauley 2004; Robbins 2002; Sousa 2003). A growing body of literature is now available to the educational professional that describes how to apply these skills and the theory and research undergirding each skill set. Much of this research was once the domain of neuroscientists and cognition experts but is now available to the general public. This fascinating and accessible information provides a new window into the acquisition and exercise of necessary interpersonal leadership skills.

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