

The Socially Intelligent

Daniel Goleman

Ms. Smith, a seasoned middle school principal, prided herself on acclimating new teachers to her school's practices. She modeled lessons for teachers and made herself available to answer their questions. She remained frustrated, however, when three of her newly hired teachers were slow to use strategies that she knew would help their students.

So Ms. Smith tried something different. One day, she got substitute coverage for the three teachers and took them to another school to watch two master teachers instruct their classes. Afterward, she took them out to lunch as her guests and spent the rest of the day talking over what they had observed. Within two weeks, she was seeing the changes in their classrooms that she had hoped for.

Taking time to forge that human connection gave this leader more leverage than she had thought possible. The new field of social neuroscience suggests why a personable leadership style makes sense. The person-to-person climate created by positive interactions can make principals more effective leaders—which in turn helps both teachers and students learn better. The improvement touches all students, from gifted youth to those most at risk of dropping out. A rising tide, an old saying goes, lifts all boats.

The Social Brain and Learning

The existence of neural wiring between the thinking and emotional centers of the brain suggests that emotions can



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either enhance or inhibit the brain's ability to learn (Ashcroft & Kirk, 2001). And recent findings about neural mechanisms known as *mirror neurons* have shown that humans have the ability to create an internal simulation of what is going on in the minds of other people. When two people interact, their emotional centers influence each other, for better or for worse.

These findings have direct implications for creating school climates that boost students' ability to learn. The best climate for learning comes when students, teachers, and school leaders

each take steps to become more emotionally self-aware and *socially intelligent*. Social intelligence, as I define it, encompasses both interpersonal awareness and social facility (Goleman, 2006).

Brains at Their Best

First, the neuroscience. Psychologists have known for a century that people do their best when they experience both high motivation and manageable stress; when people are undermotivated or overstressed, their performance suffers. At a quickening pace since the

Leader

New findings on the social nature of the brain reveal the need for principals to fashion a school culture of warmth and trust.



1990s, brain studies have clarified the link between emotions and the capacity to think and learn. The hormones mobilized by the human body to meet an emergency flow freely when we are stressed. One neural side effect is that the brain shunts energy to emotional centers, diminishing our ability to think at our best. The more intense the pressure, the weaker our ability to focus, remember, pay attention, and use what we know to solve problems. High anxiety shrinks the brain's systems for learning, whereas boredom underactivates these systems. Even gifted students can fail while gripped by anxiety (Beilock & Carr, 2005).

In contrast, during inspired moments of learning, students experience a potent mix of attention, interest, and good feelings. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2003) argues that

upbeat moments signify a neurological state of maximal cognitive efficiency—a brain ready to learn at its best.

Mirror Neurons and Emotional Contagion

New discoveries in social neuroscience reveal an even more subtle power of emotions: Emotional states are contagious, brain-to-brain. What's now called "the social brain" attunes itself to the state of the person with whom we are interacting and adjusts our own feelings and actions to get into sync with the other person (Winkelman, & Harmon-Jones, 2006). Mirror neurons facilitate this automatic attunement.

Mirror neurons create, within a person's brain, a replica of the brain state of whomever that person is with. When an individual sees someone with an angry, hurt, or happy expression,

Leaders Pope John Paul II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and abolitionist Sojourner Truth used social intelligence to motivate and inspire their followers.

that individual's mirror neurons activate circuits in the brain for anger, hurt, or happiness. Neuroscientists believe that empathy and recognition of another person's intended response to a given state of mind, among many kinds of interpersonal understanding, stem largely from mirror neuron activity. When a teacher quiets a noisy group of students with a stern warning glance, the mirror neuron circuits of these students presumably sense the teacher's irritation and her intention to quiet them. They change their behavior to placate her.

During any interaction, these neurons set up a conduit for passing

emotions back and forth between parties. Whatever the supposed business at hand, we continually transmit emotions, making one another feel better or worse.

Implications for Shaping School Culture

Such discoveries in social neuroscience hold great significance for the emotional climate of schools. Sociologists know that in any group, emotions ripple outward, with the strongest concentration of emotion coming from the most powerful person in the room (Barsade, 2002). In the classroom, this is generally the teacher; in a staff meeting, it's the principal. Best practices for learning include having teachers, school staff, and leaders all contribute to a positive school environment typified by trust and caring relationships. That's where school leaders make a crucial difference. If a principal wants to create an emotional climate that "lifts all boats," he or she must lead the group toward positive, empathetic social interactions.

A school's climate is the summation of all the positive and negative interactions among all people at the school in a given day. The tone of those interactions is largely shaped by the school's *culture*—the unspoken norms, habits, and traditions that influence how people behave. To shape a socially intelligent culture, school leaders may need to change norms, starting with their own behavior. What we now know about how humans' brains mirror the emotional states of others—particularly others in power—reinforces the need for leaders to be emotionally grounded and skilled in personal interaction, both as a model and as the source of an emotional ripple effect.

A Principal's Progress

New York City Schools operates a pilot program called Star Factor Coaching

that aids school leaders in this kind of emotional growth. Designed by Janet Patti, codirector of the Leadership Center at Hunter College, and Robin Stern, a social-emotional learning specialist at Columbia University's Teachers College, the program coaches principals and aspiring school leaders to become more emotionally and socially intelligent (Patti & Tobin, 2006). Ms. Smith, mentioned at the beginning of this article, was one of the principals in this coaching program.

Consider another principal in the program, who had an in-your-face style that intimidated her teachers and assis-

tants. This principal, Dr. Lee, would routinely talk over others' voices and ask questions without hearing the answers or, too often, without even waiting for an answer. In staff meetings, her listeners responded in various ways, from sullen silence to outright confrontation.

Even a leisurely session meant to encourage staff members to share their concerns became tense because of this principal's leadership style. When one assistant principal did speak up, Dr. Lee made a remark after every sentence. At the sound of the period bell, everyone bolted out of the room. Afterward, exasperated with how things had gone, she asked her coach, "I'm still doing it, aren't I?"

After a series of coaching sessions, Dr. Lee had a breakthrough. One Friday, she accompanied the district's regional instructional supervisor on a walkthrough of the school's English Language Arts classrooms. Afterward, she was furious that the teachers had been unable to adequately explain the objectives of their lessons to this district official. So at 2:00 p.m. on a Friday, Dr. Lee called a 3:30 p.m. emergency meeting of the teachers involved.

Suddenly she realized that the timing of the meeting would seem punitive—and that her sense of urgency was fueled by her own anger. After pausing to reflect, she arranged to have the meeting the following week. As Dr. Lee told her coach, she recognized for the first time that her anger was propelling her response, and instead she pursued a more effective option.

Intelligent Leadership Styles

Dr. Lee's rescheduling may seem like a trivial change, but it showed a shift in style. A leader's habitual style of interacting can either energize or demotivate people. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2004) have identified six common leadership styles and determined how each style affects an organization's

Six Common Leadership Styles

Visionary. Inspires by articulating a heartfelt, shared goal; routinely gives performance feedback and suggestions for improvement in terms of that goal.

Coaching. Takes people aside for a talk to learn their personal aspirations; routinely gives feedback in those terms and stretches assignments to move toward those goals.

Democratic. Knows when to listen and ask for input; gets buy-in and draws on what others know to make better decisions.

Affiliative. Realizes that having fun together is not a waste of time, but builds emotional capital and harmony.

Pacesetter. Leads by hard-driving example and expects others to meet the same pace and high performance standards; tends to give *Fs*, not *As*.

Commanding. Gives orders and demands immediate compliance; tends to be coercive.

Source: Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2004. Reprinted with permission. This material also appeared in "Primal Leadership" in *Harvard Business Review* (December 2001).

climate (see “Six Common Leadership Styles”). Four of these styles—visionary, coaching, democratic, and affiliative—help create a positive climate in which people feel energized to do their best. But two styles of leadership tend to sap motivation: the command-style chief who leads simply by issuing fiats and demanding compliance; and the pace-setting type who criticizes but never praises and sets a frantic pace.

The best leaders can deploy four or more of these leadership styles as needed; the poorest leaders tend to overuse the last two. Each style can be useful in a specific situation—for instance, the command style works in an emergency (if combined with other styles), but otherwise alienates people. On the other hand, someone who relies heavily on “being nice” (the affiliative style) may fail to articulate a motivating vision or confront simmering problems.

For example, a study of headteachers (principals) in Great Britain found that each leader’s personal style strongly affected both the climate for teachers and, in turn, students’ academic achievement (Hay Group, 2000). Teachers did their best job and felt most satisfied when they perceived that the school head

- Led flexibly rather than sticking to needless rules.
- Let them teach in their own way, holding them accountable for the results.
- Set challenging but realistic goals for excellence.
- Valued their efforts, recognizing a job well done.

In the atmosphere set by school heads who exhibited these kinds of actions, teachers sensed that they contributed to a larger goal and shared a common purpose that made them proud. The headteachers, data analysis found, could best create such a climate when they were firm but fair and had a “people first, task second” attitude, addressing teachers’ personal needs as

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well as their collective goals. The best leaders also invited teachers to take part in making decisions and generating new ideas. They understood the importance of making a long-term investment in a teacher and helped teachers develop their skills even at a short-term cost to the school.

The British study found that the

more of these leadership styles a school leader could exhibit as needed, the better the achievement scores of the schools they led. The results were so striking that England’s national training center for headteachers has built part of its curriculum around boosting these key skills of leadership.

A report funded by the Ontario, Canada, Ministry of Education found that principals in Ontario who were rated by their staff and supervisors as being in the top 20 percent of school leaders shared a similar cluster of personal abilities (Stone, Parker, & Wood, 2005). They were empathetic, attentive, and understanding of others’ feelings. These principals flexibly adjusted their own responses to colleagues and openly and effectively solved problems that otherwise might fester. They nurtured mutually satis-

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ifying relationships. In short, they demonstrated both emotional and social intelligence.

The report concluded by recommending that school boards should recruit and promote school administrators who exhibited these qualities, rather than simply looking at their job histories, as is often the case.

Social Intelligence and Students

Effective leaders will extend the strengthening of a school community's social intelligence to the interactions of students themselves, using any of the well-validated programs in social-emotional learning. Such programs teach students essential personal skills: self-awareness, stress and anger management, empathy, strategies for working out disagreements constructively, and decision making.

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Roger Weissberg, president of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, recently conducted a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies of social-emotional learning programs (Durlak & Weissberg, 2005). He found that effective programs lead to significant drops in problems like violence and substance abuse and, on the upside, to better attendance and a classroom atmosphere that enables teachers to spend less time disciplining and more time teaching. The strongest programs fit seamlessly into the standard academic curriculum (Devaney, O'Brien, Resnik, Keister, & Weissberg, 2006). Best of all, students learn better

in a more positive emotional climate. Students who participated in social-emotional learning, compared with matched peers who did not participate, had higher grade point averages and ranked 12 percentile points higher on academic achievement tests (Durlak & Weissberg, 2005).

Doing Our Best

The essential task of a school leader comes down to helping people get into and stay in an optimal state in which they can work to their best ability. This typically means creating an atmosphere of warmth and trust—of global rapport—in which people feel good

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2007 NATIONAL SUMMITS

2/21-2/24	Scottsdale, AZ
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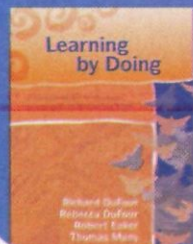
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about themselves, energized about their mission, and committed to giving their finest.

Understanding the power of the social brain expands the range of tools we have available for staying in that optimal state. Other people become part of our neural tool kit for doing our best, just as we become part of theirs. Leading a school to create a warmer and more connected school culture need not mean sacrificing academic rigor. Instead, socially intelligent leaders help schools better fulfill their main mission: teaching. **EL**

¹Names in this article are pseudonyms.

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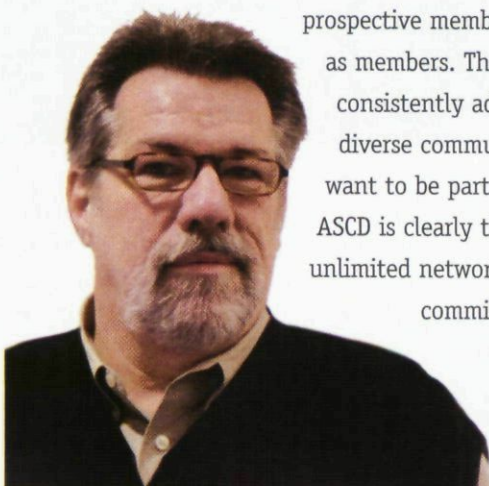
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