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Social Intelligence – Restated and Redefined

In 2006, I wrote an entry for our website on Social Intelligence as a variant of Emotional Intelligence, referring to an article by Karl Albrecht in *Training Magazine*, December 2004). In October of 2006, Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, published his blockbuster new book, *Social Intelligence*, which blows out of the water any previous use of that term, in favor of a completely new analysis of what “social intelligence” means. The following is from his prologue:

When I wrote *Emotional Intelligence*, my focus was on a crucial set of human capacities within us as individuals, our ability to manage our own emotions and our inner potential for positive relationships. [In this new book] the picture enlarges beyond a one-person psychology...to a two-person psychology: what transpires as we connect.

Actually, the analysis goes beyond just 2 people and into the realm of interpersonal contact among many people or in groups. Goleman begins his prologue with a narrative example:

During the early days of the second American invasion of Iraq, a group of soldiers set out for a local mosque to contact the town's cleric. Their goal was to ask his help in organizing the distribution of relief supplies. But a mob gathered, fearing the soldiers were coming to arrest their spiritual leader or destroy the mosque, a holy shrine.

Hundreds of devout Muslims surrounded the soldiers, waving their hands in the air and shouting, as they pressed in toward the heavily armed platoon. The commanding officer, Lt.Col. Christopher Hughes, thought fast. Picking up a loudspeaker, he told his soldiers to “take a knee”, meaning to kneel on one knee. Next he ordered them to point their rifles toward the ground. Then his order was: “Smile.”

At that, the crowd's mood morphed. A few people were still yelling, but most were now smiling in return. A few patted the soldiers on the back, as Hughes ordered them to walk slowly away backwards – still smiling.

This is a graphic example of the powerful impact we have on others, and Goleman's book delves into the scientific discoveries about the workings of the human brain that have emerged since *Emotional Intelligence* appeared in 1995 – particularly as they refer to our interactions in an interpersonal world.

We have emphasized in our leadership programs that, as a leader, you cannot not have an impact on others. And the higher you go on the organizational ladder, the greater is that impact. Goleman's insights into brain research are most illuminating in this regard. His focus is on what happens when one brain interacts with another and the function of neural circuits in each person's brain. In brief, my neural impulses, and

the behaviors that emit from them, affect your neurons and the behaviors resulting from them. This is a very complex action-reaction, involving interpretation of many kinds of clues, taken both consciously and unconsciously. But the scientific fact is that we are now able, with brain imaging studies, to observe sections of peoples' brains "lighting up" when they come into contact with each other. Goleman's chapter on the "Neuroanatomy of a Kiss" is illuminating in its description of what befalls each brain during that evolution – and gives new meaning to the concept of "lighting up my life".

Goleman's genius comes to the fore when he describes interpersonal behavior that syncs up the neural pathways positively and negatively. He gives an illustrative example of a conversation between youngsters:

Three 12-year olds are heading to a soccer field for gym class. Two athletic-looking boys are walking behind – and snickering at – the third, a somewhat chubby classmate.

"So you're going to *try* to play soccer," one of the two says sarcastically to the third, his voice dripping with contempt....The chubby boy closes his eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath, as though steeling himself for the confrontation that lies ahead. Then he turns to the other two and replies, calmly, "Yeah, I'm going to try – but I'm not very good at it." After a pause, he adds, "But I'm great at art – show me anything, and I can draw it real good." Then he points at his antagonist and says, "Now you – *you're* great at soccer, really fantastic! I'd like to be that good someday, but I'm just not. Maybe I can get a little better at it if I keep trying."

At that, the first boy, his disdain now utterly disarmed, says in a more friendly tone, "Well, you're not really *that* bad. Maybe I can show you a few things about how to play."

Of course, this is a synthetic example, which might be fairly unlikely to occur among immature pubescent teen boys. As peoples' brains mature into adulthood, they are able to be more conscious and intentional about their conversations. However, the reader can easily remember conversations between adults that start out wrong, escalate through increasingly negative neural impact, and end up producing real and injurious results on both sides of the exchange – and perhaps even behaviors that become irredeemable criminal acts.

I think that, for me, the most powerful message of the book are the implications therein for group work. If you're in a meeting with, say 8 other people, there are 9 neural processes and pathways at work, each making instantaneous (and sometimes unconscious) evaluations of the impact the others are making on them. A word here, a smile there, or a groan or grimace, or even a well-placed sigh are all being processed at warp speed by every brain in the room. Is it any wonder that team meetings are so hard to conduct harmoniously and productively?

I was at a community group meeting last month with a team of people, fairly large at about 25 attendees. They were processing feedback on an event some weeks before. It was amazing to me to see them "light-up" each other in their group process, taking turns talking, congratulating and thanking each other, enjoying some humor, making decisions for the next event, the process moderated by a skilled and admired facilitator. Then I think back to other meetings I've witnessed or participated in, where people talk on forever, interrupt each other, down-talk others' ideas, make sarcastic

remarks, and can't make decisions. And the "facilitator" is just the top dog with the loudest bark or the most hierarchical authority.

Goleman doesn't offer us any specific guidelines on how to run meetings or relationships. But his book is really worth the read for lots of stories and accounts of research findings. One of the most astounding applications is to social pathology, and how people who are murderers, rapists and sociopaths have brains that don't work like "normal" folks'. Totally abnormal and seemingly bizarre behavior can now be understood, and perhaps managed, in terms of abnormal brain function.

So can the "madness of crowds", as Goleman calls it, when neural connections sweep through large groups of people at warp speed, resulting in behaviors that might be unconceivable among isolated individuals acting alone. Think of lynchings, soccer matches, and even evangelical meetings...

Social Intelligence is a scientific report, not the easiest of reading fare; but I think it's a must-read for all of us, and one of the best books I read in 2007!

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~T. Noel Osborn, Ph.D.