



## **Getting beyond the “hot potato” syndrome: Supporting line managers to be emotionally intelligent**

A study conducted by the Department of Management at the University of Melbourne examined the respective responsibilities of line managers and human resources staff. It found that line managers have taken over primary responsibility for many “people management” functions. However, there are tensions in the relationship between line managers and HR, and many line managers are not confident about dealing with the people aspects of their role.

Other studies have also thrown light on the relationships between line managers and HR. A study by SHL found that line managers are not as involved as they would like to be in interviewing as part of recruitment. This is despite HR professionals agreeing that this is important to ensure candidates have a good fit with the job requirements and culture of the company. However, line managers want more training and support to do this. The study found:

- almost half of all line managers are not involved in interviewing
- almost two thirds (61%) of line managers would like more involvement
- line managers need more support to interview effectively.

The Hay Group’s list of Most Admired Companies found that the companies that are most admired (and who perform well financially) do better at enabling line managers to create a positive work climate. In the Most Admired Companies, 41% say that line managers in their organisation create a positive work climate, whereas only 21% of peer companies respond similarly.

All of these studies point to the importance of HR’s role in building the capabilities and confidence of line managers to take more direct responsibility for people, relationships and climate in their teams. It helps to have a mental model of how the dynamics work in organisations. Organisations are very complex, and there are many elements you can focus on in trying to understand it. You can ask:

- why do things happen the way they do?
- why does the organisation perform at the level it does?
- what is considered to be important?
- who is considered praiseworthy? and so on...

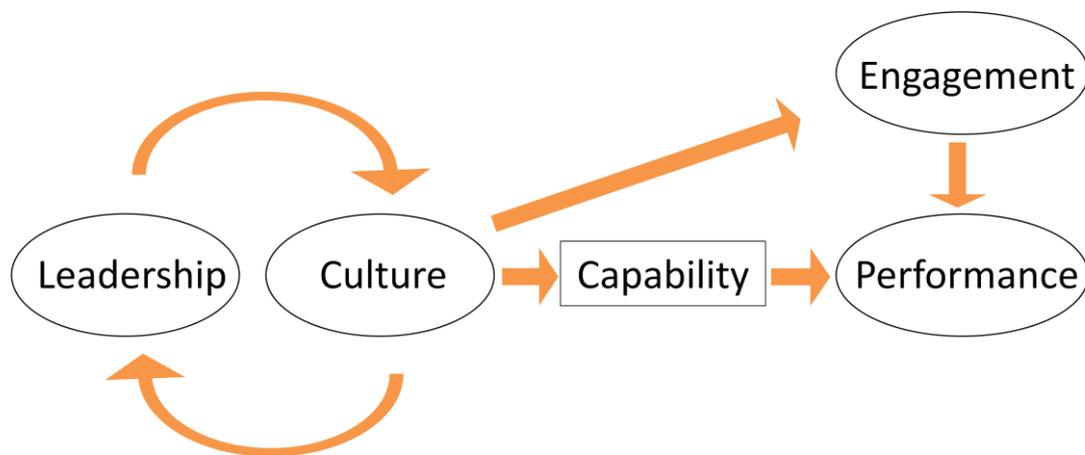
Some of the answers are about physical and financial factors, some are about external conditions (eg the market), but most of the answers are about internal factors, factors

which are under the control of managers and workers. For example, why do people leave organisations? Most line managers believe it is because of factors outside of their control, but many studies show that the key factors are ones that line managers can influence, such as their own behaviour (respect, appreciation, recognition, giving autonomy, fostering development).

### ***A framework for performance***

Hence, a useful framework for performance is given in Figure 1. It emphasises “people” factors – leadership, culture and engagement. Similar models underpin many of the common assessment tools that are around, and many of the organisational and leadership development programs that companies run.

**Figure 1: A framework for performance**



Each of these factors can be unpacked. For example, leadership is approached by Kouzes and Posner (*The leadership challenge*) as a five-phase process:

1. Model the way
2. Inspire a shared vision
3. Challenge the process
4. Enable others to act
5. Encourage the heart

Capability can be unpacked as a process that includes:

1. Selection
2. Training
3. Coaching and mentoring
4. Action learning, informal learning
5. Education, development
6. Careers

Culture also consists of a number of aspects, and an effective organisational development process will pay attention to aspects such as values, policies, systems, symbols and rituals.

Engagement is another area that is a significant contributor to performance, and studies by Towers Perrin, Gallup and Keith Ayers illuminate its contributing elements. What are the key preconditions for engagement? They include:

- communication and feedback
- self-awareness and openness
- mutual respect
- congruent systems (remuneration, recognition, performance management)

### ***Starting with mental models***

It's useful, even necessary, to have an overall mental model for organisational functioning, but it's then important to know where to start in influencing organisational functioning, without getting lost in complexity. For HR people wanting to create the productive dynamic in their organisation which the framework suggests, it's helpful to start with the very idea of mental models.

Peter Senge discussed mental models in *The fifth discipline*. He says they explain why great ideas never come to fruition. It is not that people have weak intentions or lack understanding of a new process or approach – they have deep internal images of how the world works, and this confines us to familiar ways of thinking and acting.

Thinking consciously about mental models is a discipline. It involves bringing our mental models to the surface, testing them and improving our internal pictures of how the world works. Senge quotes Chris Argyris: “Although people do not always behave congruently with their espoused theories (what they say), they do behave congruently with their theories in use (their mental models)”.

Mental models shape how we act. If, as a line manager, we believe we always have to show we're tough, we will often be harsh and uncaring, and we will prevent constructive ways of working together from arising, out of fear that we will seem weak.

Our mental models are also powerful in affecting what we see. This is particularly important when things are changing, or when someone new comes along who doesn't fit the mould. Habitual mental models can prevent us from seeing these things, and so we react to them in unproductive ways.

### ***Mental models of line managers***

It is as true today as it was 20 or 30 years ago, that line managers are generally selected because they are technically good in their operational role. Hence there are certain biases in the mental models that line managers hold. Some of them are:

- Only tasks and performance outcomes are important. I shouldn't have to think about people. They should just do the job.
- People are primarily motivated by money.
- People have to be supervised, otherwise they won't work.

It was noted above that engagement is one of the important factors in organisational performance. None of these common mental models of line managers promotes engagement. As Senge said, the first step is to initiate a process where line managers can bring mental models into awareness, explore more accurate and constructive mental models, test them out in practice, and incorporate them into their repertoire.

### ***Management skills for line managers***

A study by the Tracom Group (2008) confirmed that managers tend to have a positive perception of their interpersonal skills, but this is at variance with how their staff see

them. Nearly all executives in the study agreed that interpersonal skills become increasingly important as a person progresses to more senior roles in the organisation.

### **Interpersonal skills**

Over half of the managers surveyed chose interpersonal skills as one of their greatest strengths, while 55% of staff said their bosses could improve these skills. Around one in four managers had terminated an employee due to poor interpersonal skills, and 85% of executives had witnessed an executive leader fail due to poor interpersonal skills.

### **Communication skills**

Communication skills revealed even more divided perceptions. More than half of the managers selected effective communication as one of their greatest strengths, but 78% of staff would like their boss to communicate more effectively. Nearly 85% of executives thought that communication was a deficiency among first-line managers.

Poor communication was seen as a cause of poor productivity by 82% of managers and 87% of staff, and 73% of executives indicated that ineffective communication with all levels of employees is a common reason that executive-level leaders fail or become derailed in their careers.

### **Conflict management**

Conflict management was another area of concern, with 58% of executives citing “good conflict management skills” as one of the five greatest deficiencies among first-line managers. Nearly 70% of managers believe that managing team conflict more effectively would have a beneficial effect on their team’s performance.

### **Career skills**

The report says that training in the three areas of interpersonal skills, communication and conflict management is needed as an element of leadership development. Most executives agreed that one’s interpersonal skills could make or break a career.

Other research shows that when managers (or employees) learn to use these skills, they are able to apply them in a wide variety of job-specific activities, including leading teams, coaching, managing conflict and even selling. A large part of the success of people with good interpersonal skills is versatility – being able to adapt their behaviour to better work with others.

Awareness is the key to improvement. Tracom research has found that only one in four people with “very low” versatility rated themselves as “very low”. More than 40% of those with low versatility rated themselves substantially higher.

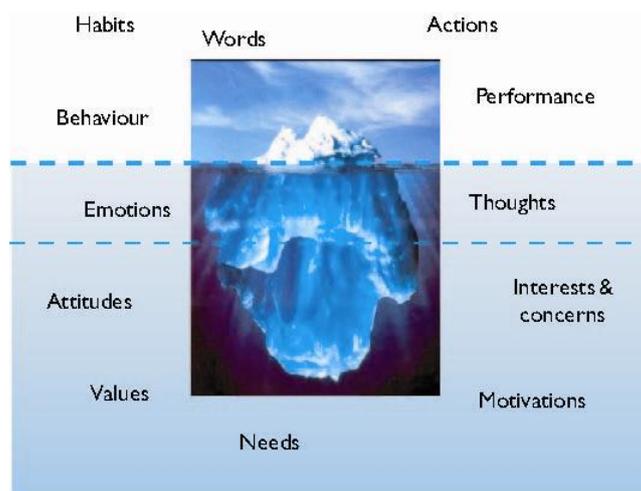
### ***Developing emotional intelligence***

The language of emotional intelligence has become more accepted in the business world, as findings from studies such as the ones referred to above make it clear that being aware of and handling one’s own emotions constructively at work is critical to managerial performance. Being aware of the emotions of others (empathy) and being able to develop constructive working relationships are the complementary skills.

## Self-awareness

The first goal of development – for yourself or others – is to become more conscious of your thinking and feeling. The image that a person at work is simply a bundle of competencies directed towards the completion of given tasks and projects has to be exchanged for a more complete model, as in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: The person: inside and outside**



### *An exercise*

The exercise “Emotions at work” encourages people to observe the flow of emotions at work, through the day and through the week. It shows people, even those who experience a “low” level of emotion, that emotions are ever-present, and have influence over our actions. It is a simple model that doesn’t try to make distinctions between a range of related concepts: emotions, feelings, attitudes, motivations, needs, values, interests and concerns.

### ***Five dimensions of the self***

The above exercise raises a lot of issues for people, for example, the prevalence of certain types of emotions (positive and negative), and why that is. It also raises the question that there are indeed distinctions to be made between feelings, needs, motivations and values.

The five-dimensional model of the self provides a framework for self-development and the development of others. It recognises the emotions but also addresses other aspects of the self that are important but are not accounted for in the emotional intelligence model.

#### **1. Cognition**

We can build up the model by thinking about the task of management. For a long time it was seen as a purely rational, cognitive activity, involving activities like devising strategy, analysing the organisation and its market, planning and logistics. The emphasis was on the skills of quantification, logic and reasoning.

## **2. Emotions**

Then, in the 1990s, Daniel Goleman (1998) (and others) challenged the current management agenda by saying that rationality was inadequate for carrying out the management role effectively. He asserted that managers also need to understand the emotional aspects of the role, so emotional intelligence (EQ) became part of management education. Employees' emotional awareness and relationship-building skills are required.

## **3. Valuing**

More recently, some writers have started to cast the focus onto values (eg Fairholm, 2003; Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 1995; Henderson & Thompson, 2003). They maintain that rational skills and emotional intelligence are not sufficient to create a high-performing organisation. A strong and explicit values orientation is required. In fact, it is difficult to understand many emotions unless we talk about values, because some of the strongest emotions are generated by actions that reflect of values – positively or negatively, for example, being moved by a person's act of selflessness and courage, or being outraged by an injustice.

Barry Posner and Warren Schmidt (1992) refer to values as “the silent power in personal and organisational life. Values are at the core of our personality, influencing the choices we make, the people we trust, the appeals we respond to, and the way we invest our time and energy. In turbulent times, values can give a sense of direction amid conflicting views and demands.”

Ken Blanchard and Michael O'Connor say: “When aligned around shared values and united in a common mission, ordinary people accomplish extraordinary things” (1997).

The valuing dimension gives people a basis for working together, as it establishes a common commitment to ethics, fairness and justice, which builds trust. It enables an atmosphere of mutual respect to be established. Together with cognition and emotions, values lay the groundwork for high achievement and high morale.

## **4. Spirit/energy**

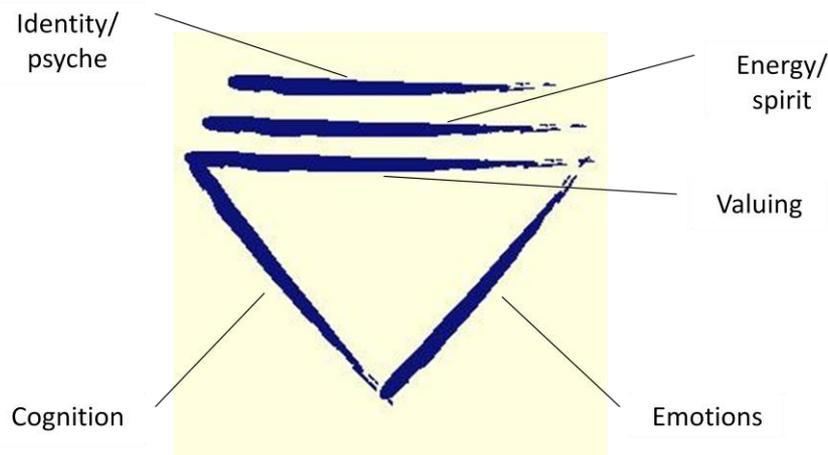
The fourth dimension, spirit, or energy, describes what starts to happen when the first three dimensions are consciously cultivated. As values are clarified and commitment around them develops, buttressed by the rational and emotional dimensions, an energy starts to develop in organisations. Two of the more significant organisational studies of the 1990s recognised this aspect. Jim Collins in *Good to great* (2001) and Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in *Built to last* (1994) demonstrated that when the leaders in a company establish a foundation of clarity around operating values and strong relationships, the energy of the organisation starts to build, generating its own impetus for success. This energy is connected with the development of a sense of community among the participants.

## **5. Identity**

The fifth dimension is a further outflow of the establishment of a foundation of values combined with rational and emotional skills. As organisations (and their managers) persevere in their purpose, they begin to develop their own sense of uniqueness, their own style and identity, or psyche. They create a sense of meaning and purpose in the work they do and the goals they pursue.

The five dimensional model of the self is depicted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Five dimensions of the person**



*Exercise*

There are values that attach to each of the dimensions, as below. The 5D model is holistic – it suggests that you need to balance your development of skills and values across all five dimensions, although everyone will have their own strengths and interests. This applies to leadership development too.

Cognition	Truth, integrity, honesty
Emotions	Peace, harmony, discipline
Valuing	Right action, fairness, justice
Spirit/energy	Love, enthusiasm, community
Identity	Insight, awareness, meaning, purpose

A good exercise is to examine your current role, asking, for each dimension:

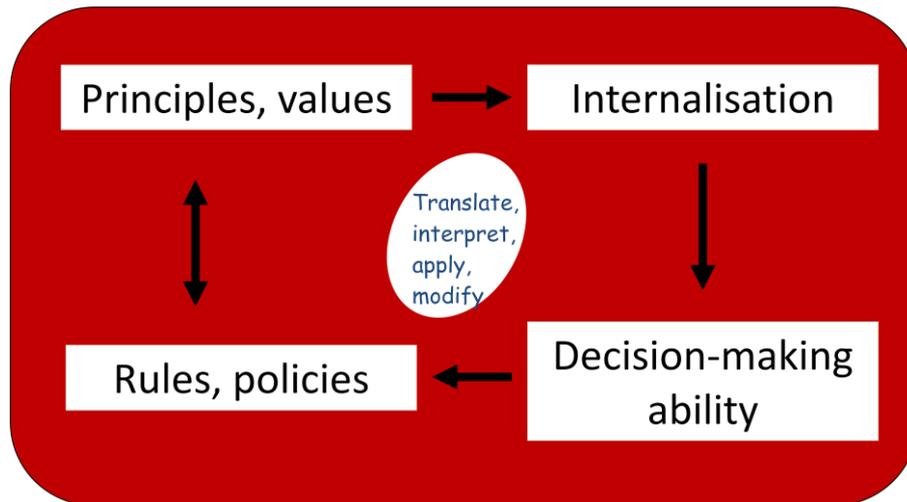
- What values in this dimension does my role allow to come into play?
- Am I satisfied with this?
- What can I change about (a) myself, (b) the situation, to bring myself more into alignment with my values in this dimension?

***Moving between rhetoric and reality***

Clarifying our values gives us a language, a rhetoric. It brings things into awareness and it makes it clear that we exercise choices in how we act and how we develop. But it also highlights the distances between rhetoric and reality. We often hear people referred to as hypocrites, but the great project of life is about making our rhetoric come true, to bring ourselves into alignment with what we want to be.

The challenge for HR and for line managers is to continually examine, question and refine our rhetoric to it becomes a deeper understanding of life, work their possibilities, and then to devote our energies to living out our rhetoric, our expressed values and ideals. Figure 4 describes this process in an organisational context.

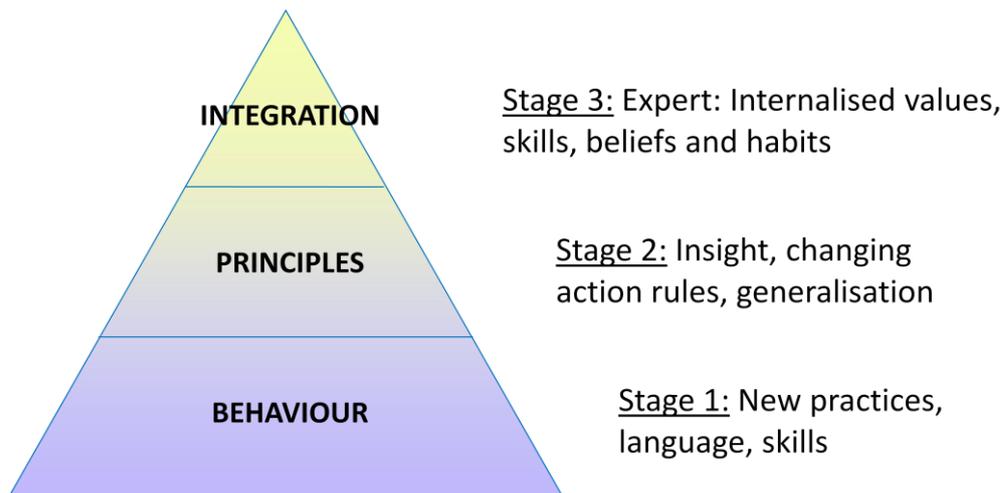
**Figure 4: The developmental possibilities of the tension between rhetoric and reality**



***Two other mental models for the individual***

Personal development is not like learning technical skills. It takes time. It involves unlearning old habits of thought, word and action. It involves embedding new habits and beliefs into our repertoire. Peter Senge described this process in The fifth discipline. It is shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Stages of development of expertise**



**Common ground theory**

Much of the work of personal development involves interaction with other people. One of the best ways to characterise dealing with other people is to use a cross-cultural screen. Imagine that every other person comes from a different culture – they have different beliefs, preferences, customs and values. Look at them in this new light, and ask three questions:

1. What values do we have in common?
2. How are we different?
3. How can we benefit from what we have in common and integrate what is different so we can work together constructively?

This is an approach offered by Fons Trompenaars. It is a search for common ground where constructive relationships can be cultivated between people.

### ***Implementing change***

Then there is the question of how HR practitioners implement organisational initiatives and programs to support individual change and reinforce it at the communal level. There are several approaches, most of which generally need to occur. The most effective change occurs when bundles of initiatives occur, rather than one or two. Eventually, the initiatives become integrated into everyday behaviour – they become informal and continuous.

The main methods to consider are:

- Training courses → concepts, exercises – social element of learning
- Workplace projects → observation, individual reflection and inquiry, journalling
- Coaching and mentoring
- Group workplace projects – business-based
- Integrating work and learning – developing self, developing others
- Other organisational development initiatives – climate surveys, 360-degree feedback, values choices, goals and strategies, systems

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