THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPERSONAL SKILLS ON STATISTICAL TEAMS

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University students are often prepared to meet the technical demand of positions in their field of study. During my 20 year tenure as a manager of Statistical Programmer Analysts, it has become very evident to me that an employee's interpersonal skills are equally important to their success in the workplace. To help mentor these skills in our young statisticians we have developed both formal and informal mentoring strategies. These strategies are centered on skills required for effectively working in a team directed environment. Some of these skills include communication, collaboration, innovation, initiative, inquiry, networking and knowledge sharing. In addition to sharing some of these strategies, background and anecdotal evidence will be used to help demonstrate the importance of these inter-personal skills. As you are preparing our next generation of Statisticians, it is my hope that you will find additional ways to weave more of these skills into their educational experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Through my role as a manager in the medical research field much of what has been learned about staff development has been through trial and error. Early on in my management career it became obvious that some employees were much quicker to achieve success than others. Much of the performance variability seemed to be associated to differences in interpersonal attributes. More recently as a graduate student in the field of organizational leadership, it has been interesting to discover that the role of interpersonal skills in individual and team performance has been a target of many researchers and writers and is often referred to as emotional intelligence (EI) (Salovey & Mayer, 1989; Goleman, 1995; 1998). The purpose of this paper will be to share personal experiences with mentoring and training individuals in my organization, provide some ideas for activities to help increase their EI and tie these experiences and ideas into research that has been done in this field. Learning more about this topic and implementing techniques to help individuals develop an increased sense of personal and social awareness and manage themselves and their relationships more effectively will pay off.

BACKGROUND

Since 1994, my job has included hiring over 200 individuals into the Statistical Programmer Analyst (SPA) position. This position requires an undergraduate degree in a quantitative field and a solid base of both statistical analytic and programming skills. The process of aligning staff with statistical teams to optimize their potential starts prior to interviewing and includes identifying both technical and interpersonal requirements for the opening. Until about eight or so years these soft skills had been relatively undiscussed and for me, resulted in a few unsuccessful hires that could have been avoided with a better interview assessment, team alignment and mentoring plan. To help evaluate team needs, we ask lead statisticians to document their technical skills along with the top three interpersonal requirements for the position. Among the interpersonal factors they can choose include initiative, responsiveness, independence, inquisitive, attention to detail, multi-tasking, timeliness, communication, thoroughness, learning style, innovation and application of knowledge. We are able to use this knowledge in our interviewing process, team assignment and development as well as during the mentoring of our new hires.

MENTORING METHODS

Much of my mentoring focus is centered on developing skills which help individuals achieve success in a team-based setting. In high-reliability organizations, such as healthcare, consequences of errors are high and effective teamwork is required (Baker, Day & Salas, 2006). Organizations need to focus on developing employees who embrace change, are proactive with issue resolution and approach complex and ambiguous challenges with adaptive and flexible problem solving strategies (Goleman, 1995; 1998).

Interest in team development and the competencies required for effective teamwork has led to me working on a graduate degree in Organizational Leadership from Saint Mary's University. After completing the first four courses which cover the role of ethics, critical thinking, teamwork and communication as a leader, it has become evident to me that mentoring for interpersonal skill development is covered in EI research (Salovey & Mayer, 1989; Goleman, 1995; 1998). In Goleman's book on *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (1998) he defines EI as "The capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships." He summarizes a variety of research showing emotional competence as frequently associated with effective performance in chapter 2. For example, upon reviewing 181 different jobs among 121 companies, he found 67% of the competencies required for assessing performance emotional in nature (p. 31).

Emphasis on EI is more widely disseminated in the business world and has recently been extended to higher education. Research conducted by Sparkman, Maulding and Roberts (2012) at a South Eastern US college assessed how EI measured as a freshman influenced college performance and completion. Those recording higher empathy, social responsibility and impulse control were more likely to have graduated and those indicating higher social responsibility, self-actualization and happiness had higher GPA's.

Mentoring and professional development ideas used by myself and others within our organization are easily aligned to the competencies described in Goleman's (1995) EI model which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management (p.26-27) and are each described below. After covering these competencies and sharing ideas for mentoring some additional ideas will be shared for developing EI in college students.

Self-Awareness is helping one understand their strengths and weaknesses, know their personality, values, attitudes and needs build both self-confidence (Chapt. 4). At Mayo we encourage staff to complete personality and work style assessments. Sometimes we will do this as a team or individually. To further understand how this awareness can help manage self and relationships the in-person classes often involve role-playing. In addition, taking time to discuss how this knowledge relates to interactions between the employee and me helps apply what they learned and can lead to better employee-manager relations. Additional ways we build upon one's self-awareness are to acquire and discuss feedback and use goal setting and reflection as part of teamwork and performance management.

Self-Management is keeping one's emotions in check, being flexible with learning new things and managing change, proactive and positive conflict resolution and taking responsibility for actions (Chapt. 5 & 6). Various tools are used to help staff develop this competency whether it is to ask them to consider the problem in the grand scheme of things and be open to look at it differently through using techniques such as reframing, positive self-talk or appreciative inquiry.

Social Awareness is empathy, listening to others, understanding body language and awareness of organizational, political and relationships (Chapt. 7 & 8). We work to develop this skill through personal introductions, group training sessions, teamwork, committee work, networking and knowledge sharing informally and formally. For example, helping staff use appreciative inquiry to remain in a learner mindset verses a judger mindset (Adams, 2004). If one asks themselves what are my choices or what's possible verses why bother or what's wrong with them they are more able to see a positive outlook and find better solutions.

Relationship Management is managing ones interactions using self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and employing effective communication skills informally and formally (Chapt. 9). The growth in this area is best measured through team performance. We offer training on managing conflict, giving and receiving feedback and other opportunities for personal and team development. One tool we teach to help manage conflict is called PEARLS (Partnership, Empathy, Apology, Respect, Legitimization and Support). We also guide individuals with tools to provide feedback which include stating intention, asking permission, describing the facts using "I" statements and always giving the person an opportunity to respond. We also encourage staff to participate in various administrative and leadership opportunities.

IDEAS FOR ACADEMIA (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002; Hughes, Patterson & Terrell, 2005)

- Interactive classroom
- Applied projects
- Group assignments
- Peer feedback
- Healthy conflict
- Address negativity
- Open communication
- Tolerance of mistakes
- Effort focused
- Meaningful application
- Encourage creativity
- Goal setting for mastery

CONCLUSION

Individuals who are good team players with high EI are trustworthy, adaptable, innovative, confident, open, helpful, caring, good communicators, lead change and are very conscientious about their work quality and interactions. Please incorporate ideas or techniques to help our young statistician's increase their self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management and find internal motivation to approach situations more positively, build stronger relationships and continue to develop their confidence. In a quote by a famous 19th century Irish poet, Oscar Wilde, "I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions, I want to use them, enjoy them and dominate them." Your quest to teach our young statisticians to use, enjoy and dominate their emotions will set the stage for them to become a star performer at home and in the office.

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