Building the emotional intelligence of groups

By Vanessa Urch Druskat (Assistant Professor, University of Cleveland) and Steven B. Wolff (Assistant Professor, Marist College, Poughkeepsie). Abridged version of article in Harvard Business Review, March 2001

So far emotional intelligence has been viewed as an individual competency; however, people frequently work in teams. Can EI help teams to function better?

Why should teams build their EI?

Most research has focused on the importance of certain task processes e.g. the need for co-operation, participation and commitment to goals. Teams who imitate these processes will get on well.

The success of a team is more likely when effective task processes emerge; causing members to engage wholeheartedly.

Three conditions are essential:-
- Trust among members
- Sense of group identity
- Sense of group efficacy

Absence of any of these will cause team members to hold back, especially in emotionally, uncomfortable situations. A team with emotionally intelligent members does not necessarily make for an emotionally intelligent group. What is needed is a team atmosphere in which the norms build emotional capacity.

According to Goleman, a pivotal point of EI is self awareness and self management. However, a group must attend to yet another level of awareness and regulation. It must be mindful of the emotions of its members, its own group emotions or moods and the emotions of other groups and individuals outside its boundaries. Emotional incompetence at any of these levels can cause dysfunction.

Interpersonal understanding and perspective taking are two ways that groups can become more aware of their members’ perspectives and feelings.

Regulating individuals’ emotions

People take their emotional cues from those around them. Something that seems upsetting initially can seem not so bad, or ten times worse, depending on whether one’s colleagues are inclined to smooth feathers or fan the flames. The most constructive way of regulating team members’ emotions is establishing norms in the group for both caring and confrontation.

Confrontation (challenge) may seem to be an illogical suggestion for an emotionally intelligent group BUT:- Challenge when effected positively is a way for the group to say “we want you in - we value your contribution”. Without challenge, disruptive individual behaviour can fester and erode a sense of trust in the team.

Working with group emotions

It is critical to have norms for group self awareness e.g. emotional states, strengths and weaknesses, modes of interaction and task processes.

Regulating group emotions

It is suggested that highly effective teams go further than the occasional “ropes and rocks” team building activities. They have established norms that strengthen their ability to respond effectively to the kind of emotional challenges a group confronts on a daily basis.
Working with emotions outside the group

Groups should look both inward and outward emotionally. The ability to regulate emotion at the cross boundary level is the group version of the social skills implicit in the EI framework.

Where do group norms come from?

Research shows that norms come from five basic directions

i. Through formal team leaders
ii. Through informal team leaders
iii. By courageous followers
iv. Through training and development
v. From larger organisational culture

Building norms for group Emotional intelligence

Group emotional intelligence is about the small acts that make a big difference. It is not about a team member working all night to meet a deadline; it is about saying thank you for doing so. It is not about in-depth discussion of ideas; it is about asking a quiet member for his/her thoughts. It is not about harmony, lack of tension and all members liking each other: it is about acknowledging when harmony is false, tension is unexpressed, and about treating others with respect.

Reflection questions

How can groups establish norms for self awareness?
How do facilitators enable groups to establish effective norms?
How can they promote emotional competency within the group?
How do highly effective groups establish norms for regulating group emotions?