

## **The Value of Emotional Intelligence**

It happened over 40 years ago, but I remember the incident as if it were yesterday. It was a critical emotional event in my life, and such events take a permanent seat in long-term memory. The 27 students in my sixth-grade class took an intelligence test and then we followed the teacher's instructions to grade our own exams. The final number was presumably a measure of our intelligence, and supposedly indicative of whether we should pursue a college education. The teacher announced that a score of 100 indicated average intelligence. She said that those of us who didn't score higher than 100 should consider a career path that did not require a college education. My score was exactly 100, and I was devastated. From the time I entered the first grade I had my heart set on becoming a medical doctor like my father, and now my test score said I was not smart enough to even attend college. And when I asked the teacher later she said I should lower my aspirations and consider vocational education.

Fortunately I had supportive parents who helped me get over this traumatic event, and insisted that I should follow my dreams. They reassured me that I should not take the results of that test seriously and pointed out my other achievements. After all, I was an "A" student, and was successful in a variety of other group and individual activities, from sports and Boy Scouts to playing a musical instrument. But, it was not until I studied psychological testing in college that I realized the fallacy of that traumatic testing experience in sixth grade.

Obviously, students should not have been allowed to see their test scores, and indeed the self-scoring of aptitude and achievement tests ceased many years ago. My education also informed me about the relative effectiveness, or I should say ineffectiveness, of intelligence tests to predict success in college and a future career. Most importantly, my later study of research in graduate school revealed another kind of intelligence which is much more predictive of people's

ability to follow their dreams. And, the exciting thing about this intelligence is that it can be learned and developed through education, training, experience and feedback. Daniel Goleman calls this special ability, “emotional intelligence” in his best selling book by the same title (New York, Bantam Books, 1995). Safety professionals need to cultivate this kind of intelligence in themselves and others.

### **What is Emotional Intelligence?**

First, it’s important to realize the fallacy of “IQ” (for intelligence quotient) as a key determinant of success in life. When I was an adolescent in the 1950’s, a person’s IQ or mental capacity was considered a key determining factor of success in school and in a later career. It was believed you had to have a high IQ in order to be a successful engineer, doctor, lawyer, or university professor. And, it was commonly believed in those days that paper and pencil tests were available to obtain a fair and accurate measure of a person’s intelligence. For example, your score on the SAT (for Scholastic Aptitude Test) was presumed to measure your capacity to handle college-level course work.

Today, it is generally believed that intellectual capacity (or IQ) is much more complex and difficult to measure, and the numbers obtained from intelligence tests (including the SAT) are not very effective at predicting success in college or in a professional career. Not too long ago the “A” in SAT was referred to as “Achievement” rather than “Aptitude” to reflect a measure of one’s level of knowledge from personal learning experiences rather than an inborn intellectual capacity. Today, the Educational Testing Service (creators of the SAT) use “Assessment” as the A-word, presumably to reflect a middle ground between aptitude (innate ability) and achievement (acquired knowledge). The important point for our discussion is that

the SAT (whatever the “A” word) is often a terrible predictor of success (or failure) in college, and this is largely because of “emotional intelligence.”

From his comprehensive review of the research, Daniel Goleman concludes that “At best, IQ contributes about 20 percent to factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other factors” (p.34). He then goes on to show convincing evidence that a majority of the other factors can be associated with “emotional intelligence” or one’s ability to: a) remain in control and optimistic following personal failure and frustration, and b) to understand and empathize with other people and work with them cooperatively. In his influential book: *Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), Howard Gardner refers to the first ability as “intrapersonal intelligence” and the second as “interpersonal intelligence.”

We show intrapersonal intelligence when we keep our negative emotions (including frustration, anger, sadness, fear, disgust, and shame) in check and use our positive emotions or moods (such as joy, passion, love, optimism, and surprise) to motivate constructive action. Much of my motivation to study for exams or prepare for speeches, for example, comes from a strong desire to avoid the negative emotions (e.g., fear, frustration) associated with being unprepared to handle a stressor. And when such preparation leads to success, the joy of achievement builds self-confidence, personal control, optimism and even self-esteem. Then, these pleasant consequences motivate hard work to achieve them again.

We demonstrate interpersonal intelligence when we correctly recognize the moods, emotions, motives, or feeling states of other people and react appropriately. As I’ve discussed in previous *ISHN* articles, this kind of emotional intelligence requires both empathic listening and actively caring feedback (see for example, my *ISHN* articles last April and July). Thus, people with high intrapersonal intelligence communicate with other people to increase their self-

confidence, personal control, optimism, and self-esteem. When we demonstrate our interpersonal intelligence, we enable the cultivation of intrapersonal intelligence in others.

### **Handling Delays**

Have you ever heard a statement like, “Your success in life depends upon your ability to delay immediate pleasures for future longer-term accomplishment.” That was the internal mental script I used over and over in college to justify my studying behavior in lieu of many other more pleasurable activities available on a college campus. Even today I use this same mental tactic to stay focused on relatively unpleasant tasks (from professional reading and writing to rigorous exercise). In fact, research suggests that one’s ability to persist in the face of temptation to engage in an activity with more immediate certain, and positive consequences suggest emotional or intrapersonal intelligence and is quite predictive of career success.

To verify the direct relationship between ability to delay immediate gratification and future success, Dr. Goleman describes the classic research of Walter Mischel, a renowned psychology professor at Stanford University. In the 1960’s, Dr. Mischel gave four-year-olds a “marshmallow test” to measure impulse control which Goleman considers “the root of all emotional self-control” (p.81). Here’s the test: Children were given a marshmallow and told they could eat it now or wait until later and receive two marshmallows. Some children ate the single marshmallow within a few seconds after the researcher left the room, whereas other children were able to wait the 15 to 20 minutes for the researcher to return.

Most children who delayed their immediate gratification for a delayed but larger reward did not just sit patiently and wait. Instead, they engaged in intermediate behaviors which apparently facilitated their self-discipline to resist impulse for immediate pleasure. Some sang or talked to themselves, others played games with their hands and feet, and others covered their

eyes or buried their head in their arms. The diagnostic power of this simple test was shown when these preschoolers were followed up as adolescents. Those who delayed immediate gratification for a bigger but delayed reward demonstrated greater intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. They handled stressors and frustration with more confidence, personal control, and optimism. They were more self-reliant, trustworthy and dependable, and less likely to shy away from social contacts than the children who had not waited for two marshmallows at age four. Those adolescents who had devoured the single marshmallow 12 to 14 years earlier, were now more stubborn and indecisive, more prone to jealousy and envy, and more readily upset by stress or frustration than the adolescents who had waited for the extra marshmallow.

When these adolescents were evaluated again during their last year of high school, those who had waited patiently at four were far superior as students than those who failed the marshmallow test. They were clearly more academically competent; they had better study habits, and appeared more eager to learn. They were better able to concentrate, to express their ideas, and to set goals and achieve them. Most astonishingly, these higher achievers scored significantly higher on both the math and verbal portions of the SAT (by an average of 210 total points) than did the students who had not delayed gratification at age four. Hence, Goleman concludes, “what shows up in a small way early in life blossoms into a wide range of social and emotional competencies as life goes on” (p.82).

Although Mischel’s research and Goleman’s conclusion suggest that some degree of emotional intelligence begins early in life and continues to benefit the transition of potential to achievement throughout life’s journeys, there is plenty of evidence that emotional intelligence (both intra- and interpersonal) can be learned and nurtured. Indeed, Dr. Goleman describes a

number of educational/training programs that have demonstrated success at increasing the emotional intelligence of children. And, in my latest book (*The Psychology of Safety*, Chilton Book Company, Radnor, PA, 1996), I review a variety of techniques for improving certain feeling states among adults (including self-confidence, personal control, optimism, belongingness, and self-esteem) which imply an increase in intrapersonal or interpersonal intelligence.

### **Relevance to Industrial Safety and Health**

I'm sure you see the relevance of this discussion to improving occupational health and safety. Obviously, safety professionals need to remain self confident and optimistic (intrapersonal intelligence) in their attempts to prevent injuries, and much of their success depends upon their ability to facilitate involvement, empowerment and win/win cooperation among those who can be injured (interpersonal intelligence) But, it's easy for safety professionals to get discouraged and frustrated because so often safety seems to take a backseat to seemingly more immediate demands like meeting production quotas and quality standards. Controlling these negative emotions is reminiscent of Walter Mischel's "Marshmallow Test."

Doing things for safety (from using protective equipment to completing behavioral and environmental audits) is tantamount to asking someone to delay immediate gratification for the possibility of receiving a larger reward (preventing a serious injury). In other words, safety often (if not always) requires people to control their impulse to procure an immediate consequence (if only to be more comfortable or to complete a task faster). Note, however, that in the "Marshmallow Test" the delayed and larger consequence of two marshmallows was certain and positive. Contrastingly, with safety the remote consequence of an injury is not only uncertain but it is negative.

We ask people to protect themselves to avoid the possibility (perceived as very low in most situations) of receiving a negative outcome. Consequently, while promoting safety is analogous to the “Marshmallow Test” of impulse control, it is far more challenging to convince people to delay certain and immediate gratification in order to avoid an uncertain negative consequence than to earn a delayed but certain positive consequence. Furthermore, our attitude toward a task (or emotional state) is more positive when we are working to gain a pleasant consequence than when working to avoid a negative consequence. This is yet another reason why safety promotion is so challenging, and why it is so important for safety professionals to nurture intra- and interpersonal intelligence in themselves and among others.

### **In Conclusion**

This article reviews aspects of Daniel Goleman’s best seller “Emotional Intelligence” that relate directly to the challenges of safety promotion. For many, it’s encouraging to realize that we are not destined by the intellectual capacity we’re born with. We can develop facets of intelligence that are actually more conducive to career success than the standard limited view of IQ that many of us grew up with. Plus, it’s useful to consider the varieties of interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities we need to develop in ourselves and promote in others in order to reach our potential. Indeed, managing our positive and negative emotions appropriately plays a major role in realizing our dreams.

Achieving the dream of an injury-free workplace requires self-awareness and control of our own emotions, as well as the assessment, understanding, and beneficial influence of other people’s emotions. This requires empathic and persuasive communication skills (interpersonal intelligence), as well as the self-confidence, personal control, self-esteem, and optimism (intrapersonal intelligence) to develop and implement new tools for safety management. We

also need the curiosity to assess objectively the impact of our safety interventions, the persistence to continue successful programs in the face of active resistance, the flexibility to try new approaches, the resilience to bounce back after failure, and the passion to try again. These are just a few of the emotions we need to manage as we struggle to improve industrial safety and health. Perhaps we can get more support for this special challenge by helping people understand the fundamental emotional problem at the root of all safety intervention. Safety requires impulse control under the most difficult circumstances. Specifically, we ask people to do things that are uncomfortable or inconvenient in order to avoid a negative consequence that seems remote and improbable. That takes a special kind of emotional intelligence, whether on the giving or receiving end of an intervention process.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D., Professor  
Virginia Tech and Senior Partner  
Safety Performance Solutions, Inc.  
Blacksburg VA 24061

NOTE: Dr. Geller covers numerous strategies for cultivating emotional intelligence in his new book "The Psychology of Safety." For more information, please call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).