Sustaining change through Emotional Intelligence

Jo Maddocks

In this article I discuss seven recommendations for making personal development sustainable through the application of emotional intelligence (EI). Our definition of EI focuses on the importance of attitudes for long-term change, therefore distinguishing EI from other approaches such as personality, IQ and competencies. The seven recommendations are based on the view that attitudes are formed and developed in the limbic brain (LeDoux, 2003), which unlike the neocortex, learns mainly through emotional experience. In summary then, to make behaviour change enduring we must change attitudes, which requires emotional learning and is best achieved through focusing on the present, being bodily aware, group interaction, linking behaviour to attitudes, habit change, focused rehearsal, varied forms of feedback and committing sufficient time.

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A USEFUL ACRONYM FOR HUMAN performance is KASH which differentiates four crucial factors: Knowledge, Attitude, Skills and Habits. When organisations are asked which aspects they invest most in training and development the answer is usually skills and knowledge, but when asked which of these are more longterm predictors of performance and make a most sustained difference the answer is typically attitudes and habits. These are the province of emotional intelligence (EI), and the answer to sustainable change. Skills and knowledge on the other hand are usually learnt quite quickly by people who hold complimentary attitudes and habits.

Many of the predominant psychological approaches to personal development today (personality, cognitive intelligence, IQ and competencies) have failed to deliver sustainable change for the same reason; they do not address underlying attitudes and habits. In brief, the problem with each of these is; personality is relatively fixed and therefore non-developable (according to type and trait theories) and is not related to performance (predicting a maximum of nine per cent variance) (Hunter, 1984). IQ is also relatively fixed so is also not developable, and our ability to think is more dependent on our emotional state than on a theoretical construct of IQ. Competencies are short lived in that they focus on behaviour more than attitudes and people tend to behave in a way that is consistent with their attitudes. Adopting constructive attitudes and learning complimentary habits is more usefully applied by developing Emotional Intelligence. EI is about how we manage our personality and cognitive abilities to be personally and interpersonally effective. For example, managing my emotional state to think more clearly through a problem (as opposed to IQ), focusing my energy outwardly on relationships despite being an introvert (as opposed to personality), and learning to be assertive by increasing self esteem rather than just applying skills (as opposed to competencies).

EI provides a framework for explaining how to make change sustainable. We define EI as ‘the practice of using thinking about feeling and feeling about thinking to guide what we do, which is largely determined by our attitudes’. The following seven suggestions are about applying the principles of EI to make change sustainable.
1. Focus on changing attitudes
It has long been known that we are drawn to behave in ways that are consistent with our attitudes otherwise we experience anxiety (cognitive dissonance) compelling us to behave differently. Attitudes create our emotional responses which in turn fuel our thinking and lead to our behaviour through a pattern matching process in the limbic brain. So in order to change behaviour in the long term we must also shift our attitudes. For example teaching a person to say no assertively will not last for long if underneath they still feel inadequate. Or introducing a set of consumer service competencies is unlikely to achieve the desired outcome if the person concerned does not want to be of service to others. A recent study using the ‘ie’ measure found that prison officers who had low regard for inmates (attitude) but were required within their job to show them respect (behaviour) were far more likely to suffer job burnout (Jenkins, 2005).

To change attitudes does not require deep psychological therapy; rather we only need create doubt in them. This is because attitudes operate categorically, sending out crude emotional responses of like/dislike, good/bad, etc. Another aspect to changing attitudes is becoming aware of them. Attitudes are intended to help simplify life in order that we do not need to consciously process and chose every action we make. Once we become aware of our attitudes by noticing (thinking about) our feelings that stem from the attitude, they cease to be unconscious and automatic and become open to doubt, deliberation and change. The remaining points of this article explain how we create doubt in attitudes.

2. Make learning experiential
We defined EI as ‘The practice of thinking about feeling ... ’, i.e. EI is a verb, not a noun, it is something that happens in the moment, not a theoretical idea, and, therefore, people can chose to be emotionally intelligent right now even if in the past they have not been. All too often people know what they should do but don’t do it in practice. The reason is that what we learn as knowledge happens in a different part of the brain from experiential learning. Learning from experience involves the whole body and engages our emotions, which is processed in the limbic brain where we create new attitudinal patterns. Learning information or knowledge happens in the neo-cortex which unless this engages us at an emotional level is unlikely to have any enduring impact on how we behave. For example, there is the case of the amnesic patient who had to be reintroduced to his doctor each time they met. On one occasion the doctor placed a pin in his hand which caused the patient some pain when they shook hands. The following time they met, the patient did not want to shake the doctor’s hand but did not know why. In this case the patient’s unconscious emotional memory was still working but their cognitive memory was not.

One of the best ways to make something experiential and non-threatening is to include a role play. If the person is not ready for this, then having them imagine doing the action can also be effective. Imagination activates the limbic (emotional) brain and acts as a reality generator firing off the same neurons as if they were actually doing the action. A step on from imagination is role play and rehearsal followed up by real life experience with ‘L’ plates (treated as a learning event). Depending on a person’s preferred style of learning some people will be more inclined to taking action while others will prefer reflection. The trick of the coach is to encourage the client to apply all parts of the learning cycle; experiencing, reflecting, preparing and so on (Kolb, 1984).

3. Be interactive and work in groups
One form of experiential learning is to make it interactive. Interaction is one half of the EI framework (interpersonal intelligence) so it would be very difficult to develop awareness of others for example without being able to check out your assumptions with the other person. Working in groups also provides a
wonderful source of feedback from others and the opportunity to try out new techniques with people. People are innately social and are fundamentally drawn to interact, so it would be hard to justify how real change can happen without it involving interaction. In my experience, changes that take place are far more dramatic and powerful when done collectively than individually as other people provide a sense of context and reality to the change process.

One aspect of interaction that is particularly powerful is 360 degree feedback (surprisingly organisations invest heavily in trying to avoid face-to-face feedback which largely undermine the benefits). I would suggest that a key milestone in self development being able to give and receive open feedback without being defensive. When working with groups it can take a long time to create a conducive atmosphere of trust and openness where individuals become more truthful with themselves and others, but once this is attained change in individuals and teams can be remarkably rapid and sustained.

4. Focus on feelings and the self

There is a tendency in using psychometric tools to engage in a sort of intellectual discussion about the product or personality, often using words like ‘one does’ or ‘you do’. This helps people feel in control but also avoids them being in touch with their feelings and retains a distance from themselves. The coach must be aware of this and avoid colluding by encouraging the client to discuss how they feel, getting them to notice their feelings at that moment in time and owning their experience by using the word ‘I’. Also being aware of clients who say they feel x, but are in fact expressing a thought, ‘I feel that is a good idea’, for example, is a thought. Feelings are experienced within the body so require people to ‘go’ inside themselves physically. Personality questionnaires, for example, measure how we think we behave in the general rather than how a person is feeling at the time of completing the questionnaire. This helps us raise our self-knowledge but not our self-awareness.

The difference being that knowledge is processed in the thinking brain while feelings are processed in the emotional limbic brain. A useful technique is to discuss how the person is feeling right now in the discussion, e.g. if they feel uncomfortable talking about themselves. Also notice the depth of the conversation, it is all too easy to discuss other people, the past, the future or task issues and avoid talking about current feelings about oneself. Invariably task-related problems can be drawn back to relationship issues which in turn can be drawn back to the self, e.g. There are several incidents of aircraft crashes (task issue) because the co pilot did not question the captains decisions (relationship issue), because the captain felt this would be doubting their competence (self-issue).

One other benefit of focusing attention on our feelings is they provide us with feedback about our attitudes. Feelings are the emotional response to a pattern match with our attitudes, for example, if I feel angry when people ignore me this may indicate that I have a strong need for attention. People sometimes chose to ignore their feelings particularly when they are painful, such as feeling humiliated, ashamed or upset. Feelings do not just disappear but will manifest in other ways such as becoming stressed and unwell, rigidly defensive or in sudden outbursts. The need is, therefore, to accept all feelings as messages from the body and try to understand their origins. It is rather like managers (the brain) ignoring the concerns of the workforce (the body) which will sooner or later lead to strike action (becoming ill). If the feelings are unpalatable then we should look deeper into their cause and change the attitudes we hold, not ignore the feeling messages.

5. Change habits

Most of what we do is unconscious, automatic and habitual behaviour. If change is to be sustainable it must, therefore, become habitual. Making a change is one thing but maintaining the change is far more difficult, all too often people will revert back to old behaviours when under pressure or the initial motivation for change has gone. One reason for this is that the
person does not really want to change. Being in touch with our feelings will help us know what we really want, rather than pretending to ourselves, following other people’s expectations of us, doing the ‘right’ thing or keeping others happy. Motivation to change is largely unconscious, so once we stop consciously trying we will revert back to what our unconscious emotional brain really wants us to do.

Another reason we fail to achieve our goals is that we aim to change too much. A New Year’s resolution such as ‘I will be nice to everyone from now on’ is unlikely to succeed. It is tempting during the enthusiasm of a coaching session to set ambitious goals, but after a day or two back in the daily demands of life the motivation wanes and we slip back into our automatic habits. The trick of habit change is to make sure it is focused on something highly specific that will be easily completed and is repeated over a period of time so as the new habit is stronger than the old one. It is often more important to demonstrate to ourselves that sustained change can be achieved than to make the particular change in itself. For example, getting a client to experience improved relationships through the habit of remembering people’s names may have a significant effect on improving their relationships and self-esteem. It may also kick start improvement of other interpersonal behaviours as success breads success.

Habit change may sound at odds with the emphasis of this article on changing attitudes, yet the two go hand in hand. It is important, however, that the specific behaviour being changed has been linked with the underlying attitude. This may be done by identifying the attitude first such as ‘I want to be more open with people’ which can be chunked down (linked) to a specific behaviour such as to remember people’s names. Changing that behaviour will then link in the new attitude and destabilise their existing attitude. As explained earlier, attitudes tend to be categorical, so once an incompatible behaviour is introduced this creates doubt which is the enemy of an attitude.

6. **Allow sufficient time**

Changing attitudes and habits can take time, but the pay off is worthwhile. It may be more difficult to sell to budget holders, who are drawn to the quicker fix options, but it is inevitably a false economy if the old behaviour or problem soon returns. Perhaps one fear is about going deeper into attitudes where clients experience years of therapy gaining considerable insight but little improvement. EI interventions focus the person more on their present state and the future than on analysing the past. In my experience, following these seven recommendations and avoiding the temptation to offer a quick fix skills course, will result in far more enduring results (Maddocks, 2007).

Another aspect of allowing sufficient time is keeping the client in the moment for longer rather than focusing them on interpretation and analysis. This requires slowing down physically and emotionally through internal relaxation. Although this does not fit so well with western business practices it is a critical component to embedding and integrating experiences at an emotional as well as cognitive level. By embodying our experiences they are more likely to be retained and applied in the further.

7. **Apply multiple sources of feedback**

Feedback is the source to self-awareness and knowledge and allows us to make informed and realistic choices on our behaviour. There are many forms by which we can gain feedback, all of which are valuable. Some will work better for some people than others, so it us usually more effective to include several approaches. Each approach may provide something additional and may conform or contradict our existing self-perception. Approaches include self-report questionnaires, feedback from others, completing experiential activities, our own general self-perception, visualisation/imagery and so on. There can be a tendency to overvalue one form of feedback such as psychometric measures at the expense of more qualitative experiential forms such as noticing how people
respond to us and how we feel in other peoples’ presence. As a general guide emotional intelligence is developed by being aware of our emotional experiences as feedback on our attitudes, in order that we can shift our attitudes to make long term changes in our behaviour.

REFERENCES:


Correspondence

Jo Maddocks
E-mail: Jo@jca.biz