

The impact of a training programme designed to target the emotional intelligence abilities of project managers

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been suggested as underpinning a number of behaviours considered important for project management however few studies have been conducted to date examining whether training can improve EI. A sample of project managers in the UK attended one of three 2-day EI training programmes and the effects of the training evaluated to determine its impact on emotional intelligence abilities, empathy, and the project manager competences of teamwork and managing conflict considered to be underpinned by EI. Using a pre/post test research design, positive effects were found 6 months later in the emotional ability, understanding emotions as well as the two project manager competences. Data collected 1 month post training showed no significant changes. The results suggest that training can have an impact on the emotional intelligence of project managers but that other conditions following attendance on training may also be necessary.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades the “human side” of project management has increasingly been identified as a critical component of the project manager’s role associated with project management success (Cleland, 1995; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Cowie, 2003; El-Sabaa, 2001). Given that project management involves attempting to get the best input from a wide range of technical specialists and experts, many authors have identified a large part of that role as constituting leadership and effectively managing relationships between all the parties involved in a project (Milosevic et al., 2001; Strohmeier, 1992). Baker et al. (1983) showed that of the seven factors they identified which together accounted for 91% of the variance between projects that succeeded and those that failed, one factor, co-ordination

and relations accounted on its own for 77% of the variance perceived in project success. Yet more recently, Rudolph et al. (2008) also found the behavioural dimension of project management, which included communication, involvement, motivation and identifying conflicts, played a large part in contributing to greater project success.

It is against this background that a number of authors have suggested that the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) may be an important area of individual difference that may distinguish project managers’ effectiveness in performing these important “human skills” or behaviours (Druskat and Druskat, 2006). To date, five studies have appeared in the literature specifically investigating emotional intelligence in project contexts. These examined relationships between emotional intelligence and either leadership or project management competences associated with “human skills”, and have found some promising positive results (Butler and Chinowsky, 2006; Leban and Zulauf, 2004; Mount, 2006; Muller and Turner, 2007; Sunindijo et al., 2007). With increasing evidence suggesting that emotional

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intelligence is able to predict a wide range of key behaviours associated with effectively working in, and managing projects, the question of whether emotional intelligence can be developed is becoming of far greater interest to the project management community. The expectation being that by developing the emotional intelligence of those working in projects, gains should eventually be seen in terms of improvements in those project management behaviours deemed important to successful projects (Turner and Lloyd-Walker, 2008).

This study therefore aims to make a contribution specifically to the project management field by examining the effects of training on a sample of project managers in the UK, and identifying whether changes occur in their emotional intelligence and relevant project management competences. The results show some positive effects for training. The findings are therefore of particular significance for those considering how best to design development strategies to enhance project management performance with emotional intelligence as a key focus.

2. The concept of emotional intelligence and its development

Throughout the 1990s a number of differing conceptualizations of emotional intelligence or models have been proposed, igniting considerable debate as to the theoretical validity of the concept (Conte, 2005; Locke, 2005). Although there is some degree of overlap between a number of these models (for example most include an emphasis on emotional awareness), essentially they differ quite markedly in how they perceive the EI construct, how it is measured and the relationships the construct potentially has to other relevant aspects of human functioning. Generally these differing models can be categorized as either ability-based conceptualizations of EI, mixed-model conceptualizations and competence-based approaches, although some models do not always fit neatly into either grouping. The ability model of emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) is widely regarded as the most scientifically robust model of emotional intelligence in that it meets the criteria far more closely than others, for what might be termed an independent intelligence. The four abilities are cognitive in nature and are argued as developing from early childhood onwards. These four abilities are arranged in a hierarchical fashion in the following order: (1) the ability to perceive emotion; (2) the ability to integrate emotion to facilitate thought; (3) the ability to understand emotions; and (4) the ability to manage emotions.

Over the past 15 years there has been considerable work undertaken in developing an appropriate measure and establishing its validity with some promising results. For example, the ability measure of EI correlates only modestly with other forms of cognitive ability (e.g. verbal and perceptual reasoning (Mayer et al., 2008), and aspects of personality such as openness and agreeableness (Day and Carroll, 2004; Lopes et al., 2003), thereby offering some support for the independent nature of the construct. By

contrast both mixed (Bar-On, 1997) and competence (Goleman, 1995, 1998) models of emotional intelligence include a range of non-cognitive capabilities or personality traits as part of their overall conceptualization of the construct. As a result, many of the measures used to assess emotional intelligence from this perspective have received some degree of criticism as sharing an extensive degree of overlap with existing measures of personality such that the independent and unique nature of the construct is compromised (Davies et al., 1998). This is important since it suggests such measures of EI may not be offering anything new in terms of accounting for differences in individuals' performance, whereas the ability model may be explaining something more distinctive.

Seven studies have to date reported evaluations of interventions designed to develop emotional intelligence. Two of these studies used competence based measures of emotional intelligence drawn from Goleman's Emotional Competence Inventory (Sala, 2006; Turner and Lloyd-Walker, 2008). Sala (2006) reported positive effects for training on 8 of the 20 emotional intelligence competence areas he examined. Turner and Lloyd-Walker (2008) evaluated the impact of a training programme on 42 project management employees based in a US defence project. Emotional intelligence was assessed through self and peer ratings again using Goleman's (1995, 1998) Emotional Competence Inventory. Measures of job satisfaction and job performance were also collected, with all post course measures collected 6 months following training. Generally they concluded positive effects for the training intervention in terms of self-ECI ratings but no effects for peer ratings of ECI competences. Slaski and Cartwright (2003) evaluated the impact of five training programmes delivered one day a week over four weeks, with 12 managers attending each programme. A pre/post test research design with a comparison group was used where training participants completed two measures of emotional intelligence, the EQ-i (Bar-On, 1997) and the EIQ (Dulewicz and Higgs, 2003) as well as three measures of health and well-being, pre-training and then again 6 months later. A positive impact for the training was reported with statistically significant improvements found in the EI measures used (the overall EQ-i score and a number of its subscales, and similarly in the overall EIQ score and all except two of its subscales).

The remaining four studies all evaluated EI development interventions based upon Mayer and Salovey's (1997) ability model of emotional intelligence. Two of these however used self and peer assessed measures of emotional abilities. Moriarty and Buckley (2003) reported positive findings for the impact of the intervention on EI. Using a pre/post test research design and a team based measure of emotional intelligence, significant positive changes were found in one of the two self assessed EI measures of EI abilities and both peer assessed measures. Similarly, Groves et al. (2008) again using a self-report measure of EI abilities developed specifically by the authors (the emotional intelligence self description inventory (EISDI), reported statisti-

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