

# Nurturing a 21st-century workforce

**Tim Marshall** examines the role that EQ plays in business success and how an approach popular in schools could be applied to the workplace to enhance performance

**A**s businesses face increasing pressure to reduce costs but also improve performance, emotional intelligence (EQ) is emerging as a defining skill of many successful business operatives.

The concept of EQ was brought to prominence by Daniel Goleman, whose 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* explored the behavioural model initially developed during the 1970s and 80s by psychologists Howard Gardner, Peter Salovey and John Mayer. Interpersonal skills such as communication, collaboration, negotiating, self-management and management of others are crucial to success in the workplace and much of Goleman's work resonated with business people because of the commonality of the key aspects of EQ and the skills often needed for business success.

Goleman says EQ has five "domains": knowing your emotions, managing your emotions, motivating yourself, recognising and understanding other people's emotions and managing relationships. In addition, he suggests that how we feel about ourselves and others often affects our ability to concentrate and communicate, and even our thought processes.

Dr Stephen Covey's book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* draws yet more correlation between success and traits related to high EQ. The concept of 'understanding' as a business skill, whether referring to your own actions or those of another, has gained strength, particularly in relation to management skills. Understanding what motivates team members ultimately gives a leader an element of control that is invaluable.

Complex multi-national companies, such as Coca-Cola, contribute to the growing popularity

of EQ in the workplace; the company saw division leaders who developed EQ competencies outperform their targets by more than 15 per cent, while those who didn't missed their targets by the same margin (McClelland, 1999).

## Nurture groups and their role in building EQ

In recent years, schools have begun to apply Goleman's principles with the introduction of specialist emotional literacy roles and the growth of nurture groups. These aim to manage the social and emotional problems caused by a breakdown of society so that children can manage themselves more effectively and create an environment in which they feel motivated and ready to learn.

Growing in popularity, in accordance with the increasing emphasis on an 'inclusive' society, nurture groups are based on the fundamental principles of attachment theory. Attachment theory describes the dynamics of long-term relationships between humans, especially within families and among life-long friends. In the 1980s, the theory was extended to attachment in adults and then extended again to adult romantic relationships. It can be argued, however, that attachment theory goes beyond that. →

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## The problems that nurture groups look to address can often occur in the workplace

Four styles of attachment have been identified in adults: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant. Investigators have explored the stability and organisation of mental working models that underlie these attachment styles. They have also explored the impact of attachment on relationship outcomes and how it functions in relationship dynamics.

Individual differences in adult attachment behaviour are reflections of the expectations and beliefs people have formed about themselves and their close relationships on the basis of their attachment histories; these working models are relatively stable and, as such, may be reflections of early care-giving experiences.

### A theory on EQ and nurture

The bell curve below represents the general population against personal belief, where one end of the scale is an unhealthy belief that your life is insignificant and the other an unhealthy and destructive narcissism. The majority of people are in the middle and will move marginally up and down the scale based on circumstances, ie mass redundancy may make you believe you are just another number, whereas promotion or recognition may make you believe you have importance.

People who live their lives on the extremes of the bell curve have beliefs that may cause them to

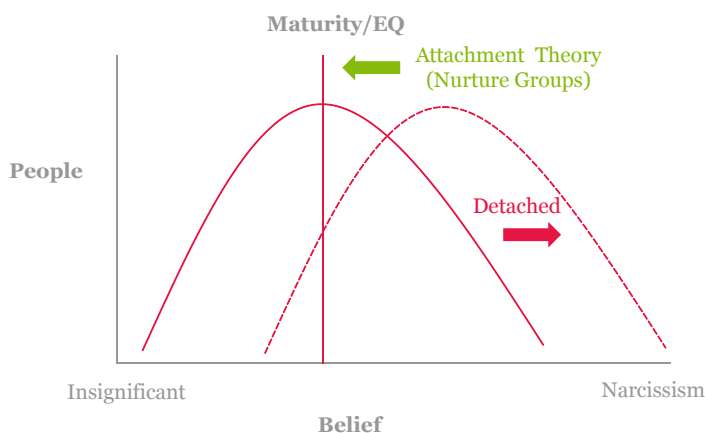


exhibit extreme behaviour, ie sociopathic behaviour is a detachment from reality and the concept of 'others'. In the middle of our standard bell curve, people exhibit what we might term 'maturity': they have a good level of self-awareness and recognise the awareness of others and their needs.

The dotted bell curve is what is happening as a result of the change in society: there is less concept of the family, an increase in social problems, a preoccupation with fame and acquisition, and a need to win at all cost. In addition, reduced loyalty in the workplace, more home-working and the advancement of technology for individual entertainment are major contributing factors to changes in societal make-up. Essentially, some would believe that these factors are driving us to become more detached from our relationships.

Nurture groups (on a small scale) actually try to push the bell curve the other way, based on attachment theory. Healthy relationships are modelled by staff, sharing is encouraged, children can voice their feelings, meals are a sociable event, children are given responsibility and they are taught how to manage their anger or deal with feelings.

Nurture groups aim to teach basic behaviours, provide options, engender feelings of safety and security, and promote positive attitudes, team-building and sharing skills. Communication lies at the heart of this, enabling behaviours to be explained, understood and empathised with. Nurture groups use chill-out tents to manage anger, activities to facilitate understanding and discussion, and play to assist with sharing, rewards and objectives.

These principles and practices are effective in education and many believe that they engender skills critical to success in the workplace – they build EQ. But do they really have a role in the workplace? Are they even needed?

The problems that nurture groups look to address can often occur in the workplace. Unproductive behaviours such as low self-esteem, an inability to communicate effectively, anger and lack of attention and focus are all issues that affect adults as well as children. These can often lead to absenteeism, low application, disregard for colleagues and unwillingness to learn, resulting in disciplinary actions and grievances.

The five domains of EQ can be developed further by using the nurture group concept within the workplace. We have dipped a toe in these waters before – think of team-building weekends. But full exploration requires a commitment to the theory and a desire to challenge the preconception that 'nurture' is for children. We know EQ helps improve success and we know that adults face

many of the same issues at work that children do at school. We have one problem and a solution that many agree seems to work – how can we apply a variation of that solution to a similar problem?

Businesses that take care of employees do well: simple but true. It may not be the main reason they do well but it is proven to be a major contributing factor. We know from research, and from the statistics given to us by firms such as Coca-Cola, that EQ plays a large role in success (Goleman, 1998) but how about data on firms who implement practices based on the theories of nurture groups? These practices may not be direct copies but, while some may be amused at the thought of circle time in the office, it is true that encouraging effective communication is key to success in our personal and work lives.

### Is there a place for nurture in business?

‘Nurturing talent’ is a stock phrase amongst businesses; if an organisation’s greatest assets are its staff, looking after them becomes all-important. The *Nurturing Talent* report produced by Dr Emma Parry of the Cranfield School of Management for **learndirect** found that successful organisations have a long-term focus on employee development. However, traditional L&D methods are changing in the 21st-century marketplace, with firms using ever-more innovative methods to enhance employee engagement, productivity and loyalty.

The **learndirect** report surveyed more than 1,000 employers and used additional research to provide an insight into the main advantages of staff development as opposed to simply recruiting talent from external sources. While external recruitment can often bring valuable new skills and experience to an organisation, the cost implications of recruitment can be a hurdle, especially in challenging economic times.

It found that one major benefit of nurturing talent is its cost-effectiveness. Aside from enhancing retention, reasons to stay with an organisation often include the fact that a member of staff feels valued and recognised – nurturing talent increases motivation. A convincing statement to come from **learndirect**’s report was that “successful organisations are typified by those that have long-term focus on employee development”.

It goes on to back this statement with the persuasive statistic that “those with increasing gross revenue are more likely to have a formal training policy (48 per cent) while those with falling revenue are more likely to train staff on an *ad hoc* basis (46 per cent)”.

Mentoring to encourage appropriate behaviours and coaching can prove very effective, both in terms of maximising productivity and developing leaders. Psychometric profiling is a tool used by many businesses to help leaders develop an awareness of ‘self’ and enhance their understanding of behaviours.

Other valuable nurture group principles include attachment, based on time to speak and listen. In nurture groups this will often take the form of ‘snack time’, during which discussions form a major part of the activity. In the workplace, an effective substitute would be a breakfast team meeting to review events during the week, people’s weekends →





and plans for the following week. Meanwhile, rotas and job swaps could be an effective method to develop the concept of teamwork, based on the daily assignment of tasks to develop teamwork that is often carried out in nurture groups.

Many employees will be familiar with the FISH! Philosophy, which uses Seattle's Pike Place Fish Market as an example of effective workplace management. The central concept is of play, making their day, being present for co-workers and choosing your attitude. This popular management example has its detractors but the element of play should not be underestimated; nurture groups use play to work through issues, develop literacy and numeracy skills, and encourage members to consider consequences.

Relaxation is perhaps the most common nurture group principle that can be found in a business environment. Growing in popularity, relaxation rooms or 'safe areas' are used by organisations to increase workforce satisfaction and provide employees with an area in which they can recharge their batteries. Another highly popular nurturing principle is that of reward and recognition, although this has progressed far from the 'Employee of the Month' scheme.

In the *Sunday Times* Top 100 Best Companies to Work For 2010, Luminus won the coveted 'Best for Leadership' award. Employees cited regular breakfast meetings, a personal approach by a chief executive who sends birthday cards to employees and knows everyone by name, and the overall atmosphere of trust and loyalty as the

primary reasons for the outstanding workplace satisfaction results.

Third in the Top 25 Big Companies list, Sytner Group, the prestige car retailer, encourages weekly team meetings, fish-and-chip lunches and boat trips and barbecues for staff and their families. The policies have a positive effect: employees state that they are proud to work for the company (80 per cent), they love their jobs (74 per cent) and are excited about where the company is going (73 per cent).

Ultimately, while no one will argue that taking care of your workforce is not important, it is likely that some organisations will stick rigidly to traditional methods of employee engagement, but the ideas above are by no means the latest in a long line of fads. Whether we look at Maslow's hierarchy theory or Socrates' belief in the importance of 'self-knowledge', the idea that, as humans, we have certain needs that must be fulfilled in order to lead a satisfied life is a well-established one. Experts agree on many of these needs and both research and practice demonstrate the efficacy of 'caring' approaches to the way we work.

With the majority of our waking day often spent in the workplace, it should make perfect sense to us all that fostering a supportive, productive and caring work environment will enable us to get the most from our staff. The question is not 'will nurture group principles work in business' but 'why aren't we doing this already?' **TJ**

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