THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN HEALTHCARE

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Medical practitioners’ jobs extend beyond providing medical care and treating patients. They must also effectively communicate with patients and their families, as well as colleagues, in high-stress, emotional situations.

Conversations in the clinical setting, especially with new patients, can often become highly emotionally charged when family members are frightened about the health of their loved one. Consider a scenario where family members are upset and frustrated that they must once again explain their ill father’s situation to a new healthcare practitioner. As the practitioner approaches the patient’s room, in the hallway the family members bombard her with numerous questions. They ask why they must repeat everything and why the practitioner must ask them the same questions they have already answered multiple times. The family members tell the practitioner that they are unsure they even want their father to meet with yet another physician.

More and more frequently, medical providers face patients—and family members—who express open hostility, anger over the diagnosis, and heightened stress dealing with a fragmented healthcare system. In addition, healthcare workers increasingly practice in interdisciplinary teams with daily doses of conflict, differing role-defined power dynamics, and higher stress levels due to the profession’s administrative and paperwork demands.

To thrive in the modern healthcare setting, healthcare professionals need strong emotional intelligence, including interpersonal skills.

In this issue of TD at Work, talent development professionals will
- learn about emotional intelligence and the interpersonal skills that health practitioners need
- receive the tools to help healthcare practitioners build emotional intelligence
- learn how to help health practitioners practice emotional intelligence so that they function more effectively and succeed at all levels.

WHY EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE?

Think about the people whom you have worked with throughout your career. Can you think of someone who you thought was a great person to work with? What made that person such a great colleague and employee? If you are like most people, what probably comes to mind is how motivated or passionate that person is or how she is easy to work with and is always positive. Maybe it is that the individual has a knack for diffusing conflict, or perhaps he inspires those around him or mentors the less experienced.

What are these characteristics representative of? Are they an indication of the person’s intelligence? Yes, but not the intelligence of standardized tests or book smarts. These things relate to emotional and social intelligence—how well the person understands herself, how she acts appropriate to the situation, and how well she understands and positively affects others.

By now, you may already have heard of emotional intelligence. But do you know what emotional intelligence is, why it is important, and how it can improve your life?

Emotional intelligence is more critical now than ever in the healthcare profession. If you haven’t already seen or heard about its value, here are a few reasons.

Physical Health

Humans’ minds and bodies are not separate entities. If something is affecting a person either emotionally or physically, the other is likely to be true as well. All too often, people operate under some level of stress. Stress from work, family, finances—there are many stressors that affect how people feel. Through an awareness of feelings, individuals can begin to manage their emotions and recognize how these may affect them daily. By managing stress, they can lessen its impact on their health.

Within the healthcare industry, frontline personnel dealing with patients are reporting increased levels of stress, leading many organizations to offer resiliency training to help staff avoid burnout. Optimizing emotional intelligence and
interpersonal skills will contribute to a positive workplace environment with greater opportunities for creative, productive employees who stay with the organization for the long term.

**Emotional Well-Being**

Think of a time you realized you were in a bad mood. Where do moods like that come from? A mood starts from one or more emotions that spin out of control and start to take over our entire outlook. If the mood is good, go with it. But quite often, a negative mood plagues us, and those bad moods have repercussions for our daily lives. However, you can learn to manage your emotions before they hijack you and your decision-making abilities.

Recognizing emotions can help you catch yourself before you do something you may regret. For instance, in your personal life, you may take a deep breath and say to your partner, “Can we continue this discussion tomorrow? I've had a rough day at work, I am tired, and this is an emotionally charged subject. I don't feel like I’m able to talk about this reasonably right now.”

**Relationships**

By understanding our emotions, we are better able to manage ourselves and, in turn, better able to begin to understand others’ emotions and how those emotions are affecting our co-workers’, loved ones’, or even patients’ behavior. Understanding the needs of those we interact with provides us with an opportunity to build better relationships.

As noted at the beginning, during a healthcare crisis, exhausted or fearful patients or their families may take their feelings out on healthcare practitioners. This can cause practitioners to feel angry or frustrated. However, when practitioners understand the patients’ or families’ moods and the reasons they may be feeling this way, then they can use this to react.

**Conflict Management**

Conflict is unavoidable—but how individuals experience and deal with conflict depends on how they understand themselves and others. If they can empathize with and find common ground with others, they can better manage conflict and may even be able to avoid it before it begins. Understanding conflict allows people to become better negotiators, since then they understand the emotions and motivations that drive negotiation to success.

Managing conflict often involves calling for a sense of calmness when an individual may not be feeling it. For healthcare practitioners, doing so allows them to better care for their patients, particularly since they interact both with patients and other professionals.

**Leadership**

What qualities do you look for in a leader? Someone who listens to you, relates to you, and supports you? For leaders, the stronger the bonds they build, the more effective they will be. Effective leaders understand the needs of the people around them and have the necessary awareness to plot a successful course of action.

Since emotional intelligence plays a key role in every facet of individuals’ lives, improving it will make people happier individuals and more successful at navigating each day.

So, how do you, as a talent development professional, help healthcare practitioners improve their emotional intelligence? In this issue of *TD at Work*, we provide you with examples of ways healthcare practitioners can put the concepts of emotional intelligence into action, and we detail a framework you can use to help healthcare practitioners create a personal development plan.

As you read this issue, you should start to recognize and understand how healthcare practitioners can manage behavior through increased self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FRAMEWORK

Emotional intelligence is an individual's understanding of his emotions, management of those emotions, ability to recognize others' emotions and behavior, and use of this understanding to manage relationships. We'll use the emotional intelligence model that underlies the framework of the Emotional and Social Competency Inventory Research Guide and Technical Manual that Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis created.

This model has four clusters of competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Let's look at each of these and, with the exception of self-awareness, the additional capabilities or abilities that correlate with each.

Emotional and Social Competencies

Self-awareness in this model is emotional self-awareness, which is an individual's ability to recognize and understand her own emotional state, such as how she feels.

Self-management refers to how that individual manages her behavior and comprises four competencies:

- emotional self-control—the ability to maintain control over emotions and not react on impulse (Think of this competency as responding instead of reacting)
- adaptability—the ability to be flexible in handling change
- achievement orientation—always striving for excellence
- positive outlook—seeing the future as positive and hopeful.

Social awareness is comprised of several competencies and refers to how well an individual understands those around him, such as:

- empathy—understanding and relating to others' emotions and perspectives
- organizational awareness—having a sense of how individuals relate to one another within a group or organization and how things are accomplished.