

Why problem solving skills matters---it is not just about the Emotional Quotient (EQ) in Leadership Assessment!

If you examine the literature over the past several years, you are likely to see very limited discourse of the importance of problem-solving, especially in the field of leadership assessment and development. Countless books, articles and self-help practices covering emotional or social intelligence are touted as the answer to flagging leadership in organizations. Rightfully so, many problems and issues involve developing strengths in empathy, adaptability and change management skills. However, the case study below provides insight into a facet of leadership we don't normally discuss or debate: Problem-Solving.

As part of the Humber, Mundie and McClary LLP (HMM) assessment of leaders, we measure an individual's capability to solve problems in both verbal and non-verbal formats. While many problems involve interpreting language and other's verbal reasoning, other problems demand skills in concept formation, spatial reasoning and pattern recognition. The following example demonstrates the criticality of measuring the "whole" person when examining fit within an organization:

In the electric and gas utility business, several leadership/management roles are located in "transmission" and "distribution" where familiarity and comprehension of the "systems" are critical to problem-solving and decision-making. The leaders in these functional areas face the demands of detecting and resolving systemic problems to ensure power is sustained and reliable to customers. These same skills are critical to roles in supply chain, transportation operations, operational planning, etc. In some cases, HMM leverages the use of an "in-box" to understand an individual's problem-solving ability and style. The excerpt below is a description of an incumbent who was essentially failing as a leader. This assessment was conducted for another role approximately one year before a transfer to System Operations Division.

He is moderately analytical; he deduces the key everyday problems and takes a grounded and singular focus to resolve matters. His review of problems, at times, is rational yet not rigorous. As a result, he may recognize the problems, but not comprehensively plan the action steps required to build momentum or fully map out a solution to an issue. He is less enamored with conceptual, abstract, and broadminded ways of organizing work. He can, at first, quickly focus his attention on the people required to analyze and build consensus on an issue. He is, therefore, less observant of the facts, quantitative concerns, and hard measures required to impact and be part of the input needed for a solution. He draws timely conclusions yet can suffer some self-doubt, especially when involved in novel circumstances.

The incumbent's ability to view and integrate information systemically was clearly an issue in the performance of the work and in the leadership of the function. The direct reports touted the sincerity, gregarious nature and participative leadership style of the incumbent; however, the individual struggled to gain the team's trust due to mistakes and oversights that were putting the function at risk. After consultation, the Vice President of Operations found a better fit for the incumbent in Field Operations where tackling complex and systemic issues is less prominent.

The "lesson learned" for the client was to examine the abilities of the "whole" person when sizing up fit for leadership roles. At HMM, we continue to emphasize the criticality of measuring both cognitive reasoning and EQ with a clear focus upon the demands of the leadership role when evaluating candidates and developing leaders.