

Gaia education

*Daniel Goleman is renowned for his books on emotional intelligence, but he has since found a more pressing concern: saving the planet. He tells **Michael Costello** about his latest publication, Ecological Intelligence*

Ask psychologist and management guru Daniel Goleman about his success and he still seems taken aback by it all. The author who popularised the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) in the mid-90s with *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (see panel, overleaf), sounds bewildered that EI became a worldwide phenomenon on the back of his work. Yet he did know when it was published that the book would gain a following.

“My first publication, *The Meditative Mind*, was mostly about education, but it had this little chapter called ‘Managing with heart’ that got a lot of interest,” he recalls. “This highlighted a clear distinction between cognitive abilities – eg, working well with numbers – and areas such as human interaction and the management of emotions. Our knowledge of how these non-cognitive abilities could contribute to success was fuzzy back then and poorly harnessed.”

While Goleman still believes in the power of EI – and so, it seems, do we, since its principles have become firmly embedded in management practice – he has turned his attention to a more pressing issue: the environment. His latest book, *Ecological Intelligence*, aims to teach both businesses and consumers how to assess how green they are. The concept is already making its mark –



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Time magazine has rated it as one of the “Top 10 ideas changing the world right now”, for instance.

It turns out that our diligent efforts to print on paper both sides and recycle printer cartridges “don’t amount to a hill of beans”. Even the most hardened eco-warriors at work need to recognise that their contributions, however worthy, are dwarfed by the negative effects of what organisations and individuals buy. “Such efforts are necessary but insufficient,” Goleman says. “Right now, being a sustainable organisation is about challenging the behaviour that ignores the impact of what we buy and use.”

Buying, using and disposing of everyday workplace objects all have an ecological impact, he argues. “Even if you do recycle computers, for example, you don’t know whether, when it’s shipped

off to China, a child is going to be ripping it apart with his bare hands and exposing himself to carcinogens.”

Goleman is keen to discuss the concept of “radical transparency” – where an organisation’s impact on the planet is clear for all to see. For example, information about products and services is now publicly available from companies such as GoodGuide, founded in 2007 by Dara O’Rourke, professor of environmental and labour policy at the University of California. Its website (www.goodguide.com) rates goods on a scale of one to 10 according to their environmental, medical and social effects. It even allows product barcodes to be swiped using a smart phone to get a rating. Consumers can then share scores for brands or organisations via social media channels such as Twitter. By submitting to this kind of scrutiny,

Global warning: Goleman says companies can beat the competition by being “radically transparent” about their impact on the environment – and proving their eco credentials. Wal-Mart has already accepted the need to do this

businesses can remain competitive and also have a more positive ecological impact. In any case, they may have little choice. As Goleman points out: “We can’t control the information available in the public domain, like it or not.”

Retail giant Wal-Mart has accepted the need for “going naked”, according to Goleman, and is planning to engage with GoodGuide, which will soon have a dedicated presence in the UK.

In 2008 Wal-Mart’s CEO, Lee Scott, said: “Meeting social and environmental standards is not optional. A company that cheats on overtime and on the age of its labour, and dumps its scraps and its chemicals in our rivers... will ultimately cheat on the quality of its products – the same as cheating on customers.”

What are the implications for the HR function – and what would it be like to work for an ecologically effective and transparent organisation? “HR really needs to be looking at its own performers and their work activity,” Goleman says. By this he means the decisions they make, the relationships they build, the difficult conversations they may need to have and key performance indicators.

HR could be a big influence on employees when it comes to “limiting their organisation’s ecological impact as well as its risk to ‘exposés’”, Goleman says. And he’s not talking exclusively about the manufacturing and retail industries. “It makes sense to look at this in every sector,” he says. “Everyday HR uses stuff – and it replaces that stuff with more stuff. Every time you have the



Ecological intelligence

option of buying more, you have the power to buy something different.”

So what about the war for talent in future and maintaining an organisation’s brand as an employer? “For the first time we are destroying the ability of the planet to support our species,” Goleman says. “That fact is most compelling to today’s children, who are living with the consequences of previous generations’ actions. When attracting and retaining talent, it makes sense for your company to be the most sustainable, which allows employees to live their values. As increasing amounts of information about organisations become publicly available, the most sustainable organisations will have a big advantage.”



Goleman admits that an immediate return on investment is unlikely here. “This is about long-term strategy – sustainability planning. Institutional investors talk about ‘sustainability risk management’. Look at the history of manufacturing and retail organisations: not many survive longer than a few generations. The reason is that, as the environment changes, businesses don’t.”


So business is Darwinian, then? “Exactly,” he says. “Wal-Mart wants to stay number one, so it’s looking ahead. It’s not about ROI; it’s about survival.”

A new focus on ecological intelligence is likely to bring with it the need for new skills and knowledge. To this end, Goleman has been putting a lot of work into an “ecological literacy curriculum”. He believes that schools and universities will need to provide new qualifications in this field. “I think they will because of the importance and urgency of the ecological challenge,” Goleman says. “As the truth is confronted, these qualifications will go further up the hierarchy.”

So radical transparency could be a disruptive game-changer for the HR profession. Business leaders of the future will need to deal with ecological

ambiguity and HR directors will need to think strategically for the long term about an organisation’s responsibility to employees, customers and the environment. We are seeing here and now the current ecological disasters and environmental damage taking place – and their ultimate damage to an organisation’s reputation and brand.

Ecological intelligence could have far-reaching consequences for HR in activities such as recruitment and selection; employee development; talent management; reward; and supplier and tender management.

Goleman’s interest in ecological intelligence grew when he realised that the toy car he’d bought for his grandson, made in China, contained lead paint. That toxic gift remains on his desk to this day – a pertinent reminder of why it’s not time for him to put his feet up just yet. “I’m happy with what I have done so far,” he says. “But I think I’ll probably write another book or two.” 

◆ Michael Costello is a chartered occupational psychologist working for Dove Nest Group and Acua Ltd at Coventry University. His second PM interview, with Edward de Bono, will appear soon.

EI? Oh! Goleman’s eureka moment

Daniel Goleman’s interest in emotional intelligence (EI) dates back to 1990, when he was a science reporter at the *New York Times* and “chanced upon” an article in an academic journal by two psychologists: John Mayer, now at the University of New Hampshire, and Yale’s Peter Salovey. They offered the first formulation of a concept that they called emotional intelligence, he says.

“IQ was unquestioned at the time as the standard of excellence in life. But here, suddenly, was a new way of thinking about the ingredients of success. I was electrified by the notion,” recalls Goleman, who defines EI as a set of competencies that distinguish how people manage their feelings, interact and communicate.

His 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 18 months. More than five million copies were printed worldwide and it was translated into 40 languages.

In 1998 he published *Working With Emotional Intelligence*, arguing that business leaders and outstanding performers were defined not by their IQs or even their skills, but by their EI. Goleman points to Southwest Airlines’ chief executive, Herb Kelleher, as an example of emotional intelligence. From humble origins, the Texas-based firm became one of the largest airlines in the US. Today it flies more than 100 million passengers a year and has consistently led the whole industry in terms of the fewest complaints per passenger.

“Kelleher recognised that flying was an experience. Although he took the frills out of flights, making the journeys fun could make up for it,” Goleman explains. “He used HR to select both extraverted and upbeat recruits – if you can make your customers laugh, you have them.”

The success of organisations such as Southwest Airlines show that the business case for EI is still as strong as ever, with employers regularly applying the concept to recruitment, development programmes and coaching.