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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Building emotional intelligence one company at a time

The monumental disruption and uncertainty businesses have experienced in the past year has shaken up the way we work forever

Employers around the globe have scrambled to offer their workers the right software, hardware, digital and collaboration tools to manage this upheaval. But this is only half the story. Many workers just haven't been given the right emotional tools.

Whether it's talk of the fourth industrial revolution, the rapid digital transformation of industries or the evolving workplace, our human workforces are expected to rise to the challenge and adapt as fast as the technology that serves them. However, many decision-makers in business are now realising the emotional bandwidth needed to tackle such changes needs far more investment.

"The human operating system also matters, yet it is so often neglected," explains Raul Aparici, head of faculty at The School of Life for Business. "Organisations don't just need to be artificially, digitally or technologically intelligent to be successful in the 21st century; they need to be emotionally intelligent too, but this is often an afterthought."

Much of our working day, which previously centered around belonging and identity in a real office, has been disrupted and replaced with technologies like Zoom and Teams. These have become our new tethers to connectivity. Face-to-face interactions that once allowed for high levels of intimacy and understanding have been lost to poor audio and visual cues via a struggling computer monitor.

"Last year's events created a perfect storm for employers and employees. We've found that it's generated radical levels of uncertainty and a lack of real guidance for how to cope. This means businesses need the help of philosophy and psychology more than at any point since the global financial crisis," says Rachel Munden, head of business at The School of Life, which helps build emotionally intelligent organisations through virtual and in-person training and engagement programmes, and with a broad curriculum drawing on art, philosophy, history and psychology.

"In the coming months, as businesses try to bring people back together, re-energise progress in the economy and reimagine a new normal, they'll

need a reinvigorated set of emotional skills. Organisations will have to rebuild cultures that foster self-awareness, connection and resilience. People are not born with these skills. They can be learnt, through expert-led self-reflection, group work and practice."

Upgrading the emotional intelligence of a whole organisation isn't the same as upgrading to the latest version of Microsoft Office, adopting a new SAP or Salesforce platform. It involves wholesale employee engagement, collaboration and buy-in. Bringing people together to talk and share their thoughts is vital.

"Workshops allow employees to do this under a common purpose and in the process steadily reform corporate cultures and patterns of behaviour. Every organisation and executive has the capacity to learn and grow emotionally. Firstly, people need to be encouraged to question themselves and each other, to think deeply, as well as open up and share," says Munden, whose organisation works with the likes of Sony Music, Facebook, Google and Havas Media.

"What's interesting about the last 12 months is that every employee, from the CEO to the junior school-leaver, has experienced the same events. This is a common emotional reference point to coalesce around when looking to the future and building more resilience into businesses."



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Wellbeing takes investment in emotional intelligence

The concept of wellbeing at work extends well beyond coping with the mental stresses of the nine to five or the pressures of productivity in fast-moving sectors. Organisations that are serious about wellbeing are looking to kickstart their human capital, allowing it to flourish. This takes investment in emotional intelligence.

"Organisations that really care about wellbeing try to ensure their teams have the emotional resources to enjoy their work and realise their full potential. This involves giving employees a chance to gain self-understanding and work on key emotional skills, including communication and diplomacy. In turn this can improve engagement and productivity. It also helps people to understand what drives their sense of personal satisfaction," says Munden.

Trust and leadership have also become bigger issues for corporations. Recently, there's been a shift away from classic top-down management to new forms of distributed decision-making, where decisions get pushed to teams at the peripheries of an organisation in to meet the demands of faster business cycles. It means the C-suite now has to build a lot more trust laterally within an organisation.

"When leaders believe in, and invest in, their teams' abilities to grow and learn, trust becomes inherent. Managers throughout an organisation must constantly think of other people's mental wellbeing and be continuously concerned with their development. This involves a great deal of strategic empathy, as well as the ability to both encourage and set limits," explains Munden, whose current clients include Publicis Groupe, Google and ViiV Healthcare.

"Business leaders need to be increasingly self-aware and pinpoint how their own insecurities play out negatively on their teams and instead how to empower them. Training can now help managers be more mindful of their behaviour. It's hard for bosses to hear, but collaboration with employees requires vulnerability. To build stronger working relationships also requires an openness about each other's imperfections."

It is rare in the fast-paced business cycles of this tech-fuelled era for employees to be given the space to consider the meaning of their work. Yet if they are presented with the opportunity to have deep, enlightening, inspiring conversations, people learn things about themselves and their colleagues. It also means relationships deepen, trust builds, support is offered when needed and collaboration flows.

"The workshops, while fun, provided a confidential space where we were prompted by intellectual frameworks, guided through focused conversations and ultimately came to understand that during this period of imposed remote working, we'd actually been experiencing many of the same emotions," says Natasha Shafi, managing director of Mr & Mrs Smith, following a programme of emotional skills workshops. "The programme has definitely been the catalyst for further conversations that will help, not just in the workplace, but in our personal lives, too."

If you'd like to learn more about how The School of Life for Business can teach your teams the emotional skills that will allow them to flourish, and to attend a free taster session, please visit theschooloflife.com/thetimes

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE