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Real Learning is IQ, EQ and SQ

SQ? We've just got a handle on EQ and now the scientists are giving us SQ.

SQ stands for spiritual quotient – the ability to be creative and insightful. New tools for measuring the brain show that this talent is accomplished in a completely different way than IQ and EQ thinking.

Can we learn SQ? Absolutely! But our management and education processes are wired to support mainly IQ thinking, a bit of EQ thinking and usually actively discourage SQ thinking.

To get the most productive workplace we need to kindle IQ, EQ and SQ thinking. But first a look at these different ways of thinking.

With IQ thinking the neurons in the brain line up in a sequence, much like Christmas lights. It is how we are able to repeatedly do logical things like multiply big numbers together, do accounts, analyse data or undertake a research programme. We learn the sequence so we can be logical, rational, precise, and know that we know.

The great thing about IQ is that it is measurable. So we can hand out university qualifications on evidence of IQ, or lay out procedures in organisations that tend to give tried and true results. For example the process of identifying and justifying the appointment of the right person, or a banker's decision on the right investment are designed for IQ thinking.

Unfortunately it is risky to rely too heavily on IQ thinking. IQ is bound by the process, it stifles creativity and innovation, takes no account of the decision maker's experience, reduces intrinsic motivation, is slow, bureaucratic, non-strategic and reduces staff confidence to use their judgement and intuition to make decisions.

A famous study by Agor in the 1980s asked CEOs of companies that crashed how they got it so badly wrong. Most responded that they knew their decisions were faulty, but they felt they needed to accept the rational analysis rather than their own judgment.

With EQ thinking, or emotional quotient, we draw on our experiences. In the brain, pathways form in a bundle of up to 100,000 neurons as we experience things. It's like the way the setters in New Zealand formed tracks through the bush, many tracks disappeared while the most used ones turned into tar sealed highways.

This is how we learn skills such as riding a bicycle. We also gain experiences that we are barely aware of such as viewing emotions that pass across a person's face. EQ is how we get to acquire skills, understand ourselves, and tune in to other people. Some attempts to measure these qualities have suggested that EQ skills are four times as important as IQ skills by age 40 to determine success in life.

Chess masters and able chess players were paired up and given a chess game to finish. Not surprisingly the chess masters won easily. But when the players were given an unlikely board, both players struggled equally with the result uncertain. In this case they both had to use their IQ logic skills to find a solution. With the familiar game the chess masters, who had often seen similar games, were able to use their EQ skills drawing on past experience while the able chess players had to rely on their IQ.

We grow EQ with abundant experiences. The limitation of EQ is that it is bound by our experiences.

SQ is how we break out of this limitation. It is achieved when brain cells oscillate at a shared slow frequency such as when we are heading off to sleep, waking up, musing, meditating, mindlessly in the shower, or jogging. These ideas are then linked with a 40Hz ripple across the brain. It's like communicating with short wave radio.

Thoughts in different parts of the brain can link together and spark completely new ideas. This is how we get to be creative.

But if thousands of thoughts connect together at once we get a sense of knowing! Intuition! Insight! It's how we own our ideas and life – how we get inspired by our passions and dreams – how we unleash intrinsic motivation!

The brain stores billions of ideas, as well as IQ and EQ learning that has been built up - most of which we are completely unaware of. The brain's capacity to make sense of all this data with SQ thinking greatly exceeds the most powerful computer.

The challenge is that EQ and SQ are hard to measure so gain little respect compared to IQ. The old adage that you get what you measure is alive and well in education and organisations.

We have been sold the idea that good management relies on measurable outputs. This is true, but that does not mean we should measure everything, nor choose the outputs that are easiest to measure.

Nor should we believe that measurements are only outputs which can be recorded on paper. An observation from a boss or colleague has the same effect as a formal measurement.

In education we attribute marks to performance, insisting on clearly measured outputs to ensure consistency. How do you assess for insight? Creativity? Problem solving? Leadership? Interpersonal skills?

But unless we do find a way to assess, value and reflect these qualities we will be overwhelmed by IQ thinking.

Over the years I have taught about 11,000 students of whom nearly 2000 did their schooling in Asia. These Asian students are brilliant with IQ learning that relies on textbooks and exams. But most struggle with learning that requires EQ and SQ excellence. Set a task to make a project happen, lead a team, generate creative solutions, or express an opinion, and they are lost.

Most Asian schools have standardised measures from a young age. Fortunately New Zealand schools are world leading in teaching IQ, EQ and SQ up till NCEA hits at age 15. Sadly, our universities are as mediocre as the rest of the world, largely focussed on measurable IQ learning.

Trends in business training are to require clear learning outputs. The reasoning is that HR managers want to be certain that they are buying useful training.

But it is wrong to assume that advancing knowledge is advancing learning. In fact I have often lamented that students come to university on their own two legs, we give them a crutch and they hobble out on three. My biggest challenge with students is to rekindle their trust in themselves to think and act without succumbing to their anxiety to know everything first.

This is a coaching role, not a teaching role. Like a seed, the students already have all the potential within them. When they need knowledge they can easily access it with a few good keywords on Google.

My task is to help them see and believe in their dreams. Neuro linguistic programming techniques are valuable for visualising success, building confidence from past experiences, and learning the language skills to motivate rather than sabotage dreams.


Action orientation is achieved through setting immutable deadlines, high expectations and peer influence. Interestingly we are more likely to learn from and act on advice from peers than experts.

Positive psychology, a new branch of psychology, demonstrates that people learn most when they apply their signature strengths most often in the most ways. So weaknesses are most likely to improve by focussing on a person's strengths, not their weaknesses.

The power of reflecting a person's qualities back to them is immeasurable. Great coaches find ways to partner a learner's strengths with the challenges they face.

And they encourage learners to trust their SQ. The capacity to form decisions, be creative, act on intuition, and to allow greatness takes practice. It also helps to know that SQ is not a failure to demonstrate right thinking, but a powerful process that leads change.

IQ, EQ and SQ Summary

Qualities	Intelligence	Measurement Challenge
Evaluation, synthesis, judgment, insight, creativity, problem solving, intuition, breakthrough thinking, inspiration, vision, commitment, resilience, self belief, enjoyment, flow	SQ	Imprecise, hard to measure many right answers, possibilities, many paths, uncertain outcome, inconsistent standards
Teamwork, leadership, awareness, action, relationship management, emotional wellbeing, physical wellbeing, optimism, skills, experience	EQ	 <p>Increasing measurement challenge</p>
Knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, planning	IQ	