

Why Companies Should Enhance and Enrich Their Employees' Social-Emotional Skills



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Reed Koch is President of the Committee for Children Board of Directors. He joined the board in 2006. He is the former general manager of Assistance Platform at Microsoft. He was also general manager of FrontPage Windows, SharePoint Services, and PhotoDraw at Microsoft. In addition, he served as group program manager, group product planner, and product manager of Microsoft Word. He holds a bachelor of science in liberal arts with a major in mathematics from Reed College.

I believe the private sector should join educators and families by supporting and offering social-emotional learning (SEL).

One reason for companies to get involved in SEL, of course, is financial self-interest.

An Emotionally Intelligent Workforce

Companies know that the route to success today depends in large part on a workforce with as much emotional intelligence as possible. This is a key driver for increased productivity, innovation, and growth. It's also the way enterprises can help employees collaborate better and faster in a competitive global economy that increasingly requires flexibility and sophisticated teamwork.

It's also clear that corporate performance suffers when there is a dysfunctional culture that permits social-emotional conflict among employees to disrupt projects, programs, and plans. Who hasn't been in a meeting that felt like a family fight

and accomplished nothing? And who hasn't seen a company pay the price of a bully pushing through his or her idea of what was best?

So there is a definite cost to not having people who are reasonably grounded in social-emotional learning.

How Companies Can Help Employees with SEL

The issue is how companies can enhance and enrich the social-emotional skills of their employees.

Companies like Microsoft, my old employer, for instance, are not going out and aggressively hiring people who have completed formal SEL training programs. Instead, they're often looking for people who have engineering degrees or MBAs, to give just two examples of sought-after professional credentialing.

And I don't think we're seeing the boards of directors at most companies saying, "We need a management team that has an array of finely-tuned social-emotional learning skills running our business."

Sensitizing Company Cultures

However there's a lot of social-emotional education being injected into corporate America's business bloodstream these days. And it's

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coming from human resource departments, change-management teams, and enlightened executives who are trying really hard to sensitize company cultures to help stimulate and deliver hard financial results.

In many cases, this knowledge is being plucked by consultants from a wide set of readily available offerings. Indeed, if you survey the literature, you'll see that it's thick with books on how to improve performance by improving social-emotional skills.

I think this is a constructive beginning. But we need to go further.

New Data-Driven SEL Research Needed

If possible, we need to use data to analyze and understand the correlation between better SEL skills and increased profitability or shareholder value.

As part of this data-driven research, we also need to identify the specific social-emotional behaviors among corporate employees and teams that most affect company performance—both positively and negatively.

And as another part of this research, we need to ascertain the most effective social-emotional behaviors corporate leaders must demonstrate in order to drive their organizations forward.

Human nature is, to a large degree, qualitative. But I believe we can help companies perform better if we can find ways to gather and assess more meaningful and hard-edged quantitative data about social-emotional behavior in the workplace.

Healthier Workplaces and a Healthier Society

In the end, the question is whether healthier workplaces will lead to a healthier society and a dramatically changed world.

I believe the answer is yes, but only time will tell.