

HABITS, DIVERSITY AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: A CASE STUDY

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Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps all within bounds of ordinance... It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at the sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and hails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow... It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted...

- William James, Principles of Psychology, 1890

Introduction

Habits are learned behaviour or automated response dispositions that are repeated regularly without thinking. These actions are triggered by aspects of the context such as the environment or preceding events (Neal, Wood & Quinn, 2006). ShadowMatch has been developed to specifically measure the habits that are triggered within a specific working environment. These habits are usually necessary behaviours for an individual to be able to perform in that specific context.

People with the same habits can still be diverse regarding their backgrounds. Diversity is defined as the differences and similarities that exist among people. (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001). Three major areas of diversity are identified namely demographic characteristics which includes culture, ethnicity, language, age, gender, religion, etc; personal characteristics such as values, beliefs, lifestyles,

etc; and abilities and skills from a variety of different disciplines and areas of work (Johnson & Johnson, 2003).

Finally, emotional intelligence has become a buzz word in the last couple of years. It is an integral part of psychometric testing and personal development in the workplace. Emotional intelligence represents the understanding and managing of our emotional responses. It is the ability to deal effectively with daily environmental demands and pressures.

Now, how do these three areas fit together?

Rationale

The purpose of this case study is to illustrate that people from different backgrounds, cultures, religions, ethnicities, age and gender as well as different emotional intelligence abilities can still share the same habits which make them successful in a specific working environment doing a specific job.

Description

A prominent South African Mining Company has decided to roll out six new learnership positions in their Information Technology Department, specialising in the configuration and maintenance of information technology programmes used by the company. As part of the selection criteria ShadowMatch was used as a screening tool in the process. It was done specifically to establish whether candidates had the same habits of those people that were successful currently within that job environment.

It was required that the top performers in the Information Technology Department, doing the specific job mentioned, should complete the

ShadowMatch worksheet in order to establish the benchmark for the learnership applicants. Two employees were identified as top performers; a white Afrikaans male, late 20s and a black Tswana female, mid 20s. After completion of the worksheet these two totally diverse individuals; regarding age, cultural background, ethnicity, language and gender matched each other's habits 92%! This means that they were 92% the same regarding the measured behavioural outputs in the working environment.

Five critical habits were also identified. These were their strongest habits and of great necessity in the effectiveness of their work. Both the individuals have indicated strong habits regarding responsiveness (the habit of acting immediately), discipline (the habit of working in an environment where adherence to structure, rules and regulations and time frames are imperative), resilience (applying one self relentlessly to solve problems and overcome challenges), self confidence (the habit of acting with a high level of trust in your abilities, qualities and judgement, knowing who you are and what you can and can't do) and simplification (the habit of breaking complex scenarios down to linear challenges that can easily be solved).

What interested me was the fact that even though these two individuals shared the same habits, their emotional intelligence composite scales were markedly different from one another. Both individuals completed the Bar-On EQi previously for developmental purposes. The most significant difference was evident in the interpersonal realm. This realm is concerned with what is known as people skills. It indicates that when a person functions effectively in this area, this individual tends to be responsible and dependable. They understand, interact with and relate well to others in different situations. These individuals inspire trust and function adequately as part of a team (Stein & Book, 2006).

The white Afrikaans male indicated effective functioning in the realm of interpersonal skills, whereas the black female indicated this area as an area of enrichment. Referring back to the habits of ShadowMatch, habits regarding people skills are also measured. These areas are called people positive, altruism and team inclination. I would also like to include the habit of conflict handling because a combination of emotional intelligence scales; including some of the subscales in the interpersonal realm; makes up effective conflict handling abilities.

Both individuals assessed on ShadowMatch demonstrated the habit of working with people in a positive way, building positive relationships, influencing others in a positive way, willingness to assist others without expecting something back as well as working with others as part of a team. The habit of conflict handling, taking on a problem or situation and dealing with it also registered as a strong behavioural outcome.

The results from the Bar-On EQi demonstrated that the black female lacked effective coping skills regarding the composite scale of empathy. Empathy is the ability to emotionally read other people, to be able to understand others and give consideration to their perspectives (Stein & Book, 2006). It might also be an indication that she behaves very selectively regarding empathy towards others. Her social responsibility scale also indicated limited or restricted ability towards being a cooperative, contributing and constructive member of a team or social group (Stein & Book, 2006). Regarding her ability towards interpersonal relationships, she seems to be just barely effective, indicating that there is still room for improvement in this particular area. Handling conflict in an effective and constructive manner ties closely in with these three composite scales.

Taking all the results into consideration, I took the time to speak to these two individual's line manager. I asked her about their behaviour at work and how they handled tasks. Her answer verified the test results. Both individuals were

extremely effective at their work, always reaching targets and outperforming what is expected of them. However, the white male was seen as a more approachable individual, whereas the black female was seen as more of a “hard” individual, sometimes battling to cooperate effectively with the team.

It was evident. Even though both these diverse individuals shared the same habits; e.g. dealing or assisting people, being part of a team and handling conflict; the effectiveness thereof; emotionally; was different. The one (white male) had effective, constructive skills and abilities to deal with these types of situation, where the other (black female) also dealt with these situations but sometimes in an ineffective and destructive manner.

Conclusion

From this case study it can be concluded that people from diverse backgrounds regarding demographics, personality and skills can still share the same habits that can make them effective in a specific working environment. However, these habits are restricted to only output, the effectiveness of the specific output seems to be tied into the degree of emotional intelligence.

Therefore ShadowMatch seems to be an excellent tool to measure habitual outcomes, and what is needed in a specific work context. These habits can then be built on by using other developmental psychometric tools.

References

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