The Importance of "People" Skills
in the World of Science Robert
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In the early 1980s I spoke with a group of parents about raising children to be more confident and resilient. As I always do when I discuss resilience I emphasized such concepts as empathy, empathic communication, and problem-solving skills. The audience was especially responsive to the themes I addressed and a lively discussion followed my formal presentation. A great deal of good-natured laughter accompanied several of the questions.

One mother talked about her son who was in middle school. She described her disappointment in his not "reaching his full potential" in terms of his grades. She referred to my discussion of "negative scripts" in which I highlighted the phenomenon of repeatedly saying or doing the same things even if our actions have proven ineffective.

This mother observed, "I have told my son he could do better in school if he applied himself more. I have taken away TV and other privileges, but his grades have not improved. How do you motivate kids to apply themselves?"

Given her description I assumed her son was barely achieving passing grades. I asked, "What are your son's grades?"

She smiled, but instead of answering my question she replied, "He should be able to do better."

"But what are his grades?"

She looked a little sheepish, and finally said, "He has a B average, but he could do better."

Before I could respond, another parent exclaimed, "A B average! Send him to my house. If my daughter even earned one B I would think it was a major accomplishment."

The audience laughed. Others shared their "negative scripts" and we had a lively, fun interaction. I have found that humor is such an important component at my presentations, allowing people to discuss serious topics but in a more open, comfortable manner.

Near the end of the Q&A session a man commented with some levity, "I really enjoyed your talk, but I don't know how you psychologists can work each day with such difficult to define concepts as empathy, social skills, and self-esteem. It must be taxing. Psychotherapy does not seem to be a very precise science."

In a wry manner I replied, "Oh, it's not too taxing for me. I'm just a naturally talented therapist."

The man and the rest of the audience laughed. Given the light mood in the room, I playfully asked the man what his profession was. I wasn't very surprised when he responded, "I'm an engineer." And then he added, "And I work with precise numbers."

I smiled and said, "I don't know how you engineers can work all day long with such well-defined concepts and precise numbers. I just don't think I could do so. It might get very boring."

We all had a good laugh and it allowed me to assert in a more serious vein, "The study and application of science and the study and application of effective interpersonal skills are not mutually exclusive."

Reflections on a Conversation with an Engineer

On a number of occasions I've thought about the exchange I had with this engineer. I should note that compared to when I first entered graduate school more than 40 years ago, psychologists and other mental health professionals are now using increasingly well-defined, scientifically-based assessment and therapeutic techniques. However, I still believe that the so-called "art" of doing therapy cannot be underestimated, especially if it is paired with scientific knowledge. I have known mental health professionals who are well-versed in the theoretical underpinnings of therapy, but whose actual practice of therapy does not parallel their theoretical knowledge. What is the problem? Not infrequently, they need to strengthen their ability to be empathic and to display what is commonly referred to as "bedside manner."

It is little wonder that I was drawn to Daniel Goleman's books addressing the themes of emotional and social intelligence. In all of his writings Goleman skillfully summarizes a body of research, including studies of the brain, that support the notion that our capacity to be empathic, to manage our emotions, to relate and communicate

effectively with others, are key ingredients of success and happiness in both our personal and professional lives.

I also thought about the exchange I had with the engineer when Harvard Medical School re-designed their curriculum for medical students to place greater emphasis on reinforcing empathy and interpersonal skills. I devoted my June, 2006 website article to describing these changes. I wrote that a key modification in the curriculum involved providing opportunities for students to gain a more thorough understanding of illness from the patient's perspective. One of the ways that Harvard sought to accomplish this task was to have medical students shadow patients to their different appointments, actually spending time with them in waiting rooms, and chatting about nonmedical issues. Dr. Joseph Martin, the former dean of Harvard Medical School who was instrumental in initiating the changes in the curriculum, said he was concerned that students were perceiving patients as "cases" when "it's all about patients as people. We want to create a different mindset."

A *Time* magazine article by Nathan Thornburgh detailing the changes at Harvard and other medical schools noted, "Educators are beginning to realize that empathy is as valuable to a doctor as any clinical skill. Whether it's acknowledging that a patient was inconvenienced by having to wait an hour before being seen or listening when someone explains why he didn't take his meds, doctors who try to understand their patients may be the best antidote for the widespread dissatisfaction with today's healthcare system."

Going Beyond "Hard" Science at MIT

Recently, I was drawn back to my conversation with the engineer by an article in *The Boston Globe* written by Tracy Jan. The title of the article immediately grabbed my attention: "At MIT, a New Focus on Generating 'People' Skills."

Jan writes, "The students practice networking and hone 'elevator pitches,' entrepreneurial ideas summarized in under a minute. They don blindfolds for team-building activities. Failure is met with candid critiques about their leadership styles. This isn't a business school. It's a new engineering class at one of the premier engineering universities in the world, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

In our book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life,* my friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I

highlight the importance of empathy, empathic communication, and connectedness to others as essential components of leading a more fulfilling, resilient lifestyle. Thus, I was fascinated by what followed in the *Globe* article.

"MIT created the unusual undergraduate program in response to industry pressures to produce engineers who are as skilled at communicating face-to-face as they are at writing complicated computer codes on their own. Business leaders complain that many of today's engineering graduates, trained as abstract thinkers, have too little grounding in the actual practice of working with others to deliver innovative products amid time and budget constraints."

Obviously, this disconnect between technical skills and people skills is not unique to the field of engineering, but I was impressed that MIT was actively addressing the problem. Tanya Goldhaber, a senior mechanical engineering major who was reported to be initially skeptical about the program, notes that it boosted her confidence and "widened her career aspirations." Goldhaber remarks, "There's this pervasive attitude that we're engineers, we build stuff. We don't need all that silly management training. A lot of MIT graduates go out into the real world and fall on their faces because they don't know how to work within a company. They expect their bosses to be impressed by their creativity, but they don't deliver the product on time."

The *Globe* article quotes Edward Crawley, a 1976 graduate of MIT and director of the Gordon engineering leadership program responsible for the emphasis on people skills. "One of the pretty clear messages that has come through is that MIT graduates work hard and are analytical and creative, but they don't rise to influence their organizations in a larger way."

Bernard Gordon, a 1948 graduate of MIT whose $20 million gift helped to launch this new program, is acutely aware of the need to nurture people skills, which he attributes to developing as a naval officer. "Most new companies fail despite assembling a group of smart engineers because no one is comfortable shouldering the responsibilities of leadership. Young engineers should be trained to understand the needs of others and be able to motivate a team of diverse personalities."

Gordon's observations about the skills required of engineers parallel those posited by Goleman under the labels of emotional and social intelligence as do the following list of abilities that the leadership program at MIT is addressing:

Ability to assess risk and take initiative.

Willingness to make decisions in the face of uncertainty.

Urgency and the will to deliver objectives on time in the face of constraints or obstacles.

Resourcefulness and flexibility.

Trust and loyalty in a team setting.

Relating to others.

Not Mutually Exclusive Domains

As noted earlier, I said to the engineer at my presentation, "The study and application of science and the study and application of effective interpersonal skills are not mutually exclusive." I feel even more convinced of that statement than when I first made it, bolstered by events that have taken place since the early 1980s. For instance, the concept of emotional intelligence has entered our lexicon and been afforded serious consideration, especially in the business world. Innovative leaders at Harvard Medical School, MIT, and other renowned institutions have recognized the importance of focusing part of the curriculum on enhancing people skills. This is not to suggest that individuals who gravitate towards careers in engineering or related fields are more limited in emotional intelligence than those who enter careers that require greater interpersonal savvy. Rather, people skills are necessary in all facets of one's life regardless of one's career responsibilities.

As many of my readers are aware, I have long advocated that we should incorporate the skills associated with emotional and social intelligence into the curriculum from the time a child enters school (hopefully, the early development of these intelligences will take place in the home environment prior to a child beginning school). In other writings I have argued that a teacher modeling and reinforcing people skills is not engaged in a separate curriculum that in any way detracts from teaching academic subject matter. Rather, the more that individuals of any age are able to learn and apply the skills that MIT is addressing in their leadership program, the more we will be

nurturing the "whole" person. Such a person will not only be receptive to learning academic material, but, as importantly, will feel increasingly self-assured and better equipped to relate effectively and satisfactorily with others.

MIT student Goldhaber captures this position about the "whole" person when she observes, "I literally thought two years ago that I'd be an engineer sitting in a cubicle cranking out equations for the rest of my life. Now I've discovered that I'm good at people as well as machines, and I never would have had the gumption to explore that without this program."

How encouraging it would be for all of us to gain this perspective and confidence. And how encouraging it would be if this perspective tempered the emphasis on high-stakes testing that pervades many schools today and allowed us to appreciate that one's scores on a standardized test do not measure the "whole" child nor necessarily predict the journey that child will take in life.

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