

Can You Read the Room? Social Awareness at Work

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Imagine you're walking into a meeting with your work team or into the dining room at your extended family's holiday meal. How well can you "read" the feelings of the people in that room? Who is happy? Who is tense? Who bristles with anger or glows with warmth at every comment made by one individual?

Now, consider where you work. You probably know the formal organizational chart, but how well do you know the informal, unwritten character of the company? Who do you go to if you want to make sure your idea moves forward? What are the unspoken rules that a new employee coming in wouldn't know?

Whether you're considering one person or your workplace, in my model of emotional intelligence we call the ability to "read" them Social Awareness. Together, Empathy and Organizational Awareness are the competencies that make up one of the four domains of emotional intelligence. Here is what I mean by Empathy and Organizational Awareness, why they matter, and some questions to ask yourself.

Reading the Room

Empathy means having the ability to perceive the feelings of other people and how they see the world. Listening attentively to understand someone's point of view, you take interest in their concerns. Because of your awareness of others, you are able to express yourself so you can be understood. Leaders with this competency are skilled at finding ways to collaborate with people from a range of backgrounds. They also can accurately "read" the feelings of the people around the conference table. Managers and leaders skilled at empathy perform better according to research conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership. Executives with high empathy are better able to keep employees engaged, while employees with empathy provide customers with the very best experience.

Ask Yourself: How well am I able to pick up on the feelings and thoughts of another person when we're in a one-on-one situation? Or in a group? Can I look around the table at a work meeting and accurately name how each person is feeling?

How Do Things Really Work in Your Workplace?

Organizational Awareness means being able to recognize the power relationships, emotional currents, networks, influencers, and dynamics in an organization. Leaders with this ability understand how the organization really works, including its unwritten rules and the values that guide the organization. People skilled at this competency know exactly the right person to approach when they want to make something happen at work. They also know who they can pull together from different parts of the organization when a coalition is needed to get something done. Research from the University of Toronto Rotman School of Management shows that to be a

change maker in an organization what matters more than your position in the organizational hierarchy is being able to read and mobilize informal networks needed to make the change occur. Ask Yourself: Can I draw a “how things really work” diagram of my workplace? What would I tell a new colleague if they asked about our company’s unwritten rules? Who would I ask if I wanted to make something happen at work?



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