

What is an attitude?

By Amanda Knight, Director of Programmes CAEI

Over the last few issues of AppliedEI we've been reinforcing the case for attitudes as a foundation for emotional intelligence.

But what do we mean exactly by the term 'attitude'?

An attitude is defined in Longman's dictionary as "A feeling, emotion, or mental position with regard to a fact or state."

These feeling positions are adopted in response to what we think or believe, and affect how we behave, so attitudes are also defined in 'Work Psychology – Understanding Human Behaviour in the Workplace' (1998) by John Arnold, Cary Cooper, Ivan Robertson as:

"... a person's predisposition to think, feel or behave in certain ways towards certain defined targets."

We have different attitudes towards different things. For example, we have an attitude towards any organisation that we work with. We will also have an attitude about a new idea or concept that is presented to us, eg. what is your attitude towards the concept of emotional intelligence? What do you think about EI, and how do you feel about it?

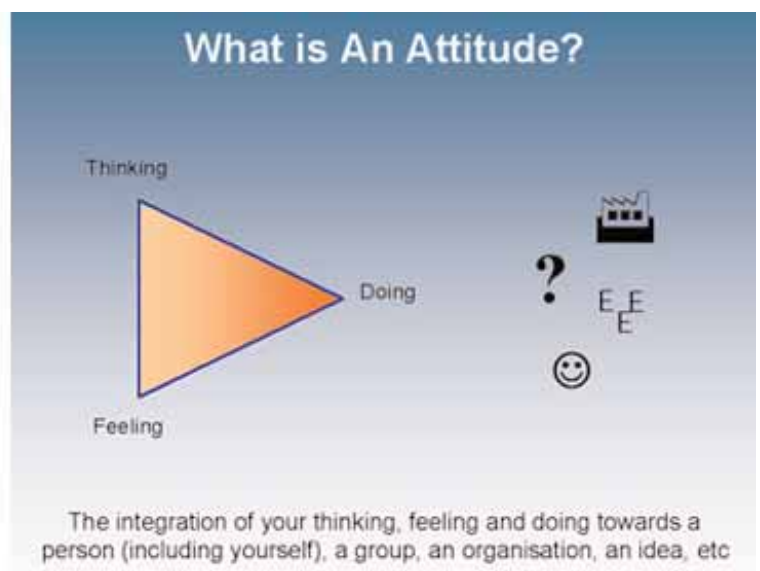
We also have an attitude, or a collection of attitudes towards ourselves.

So to work out what our attitude is towards something, we need to identify what thoughts we have associated with it (ie. our beliefs), and how we feel about it (our physiological, emotional or intuitive response). This will raise our awareness of how we are likely to be behaving towards it (the outcome).

We can then choose to change this attitude if it no longer serves us. We can change our beliefs (our personal opinion of how something is) by updating our perceptions about it with new up-to-date information, rather than recycling old limiting views.

We can also change how we feel about something.

We know from PNI (the science of Psychoneuroimmunology) that our feelings originate in response to perceptions and information processed in our Limbic System, the emotional brain. This part of the brain is in constant 2-way communication with every other system within the body – from the Cortex (cognitive mind), to our Autonomic Nervous System (where our fight/flight and stress responses play out), our Immune System (our health defences), and our Endocrine System (our hormones). We'll discuss more about PNI in subsequent issues.



Since our feeling patterns may become fixed and outdated, it is important that we are aware of them and able to test whether they are applicable to current situations, and if not, to update them. Just trying to change behaviours without changing the underlying feeling patterns, or the perceptions on which they are based, will not facilitate sustainable personal change.

So this brings us full circle to the CAEI definition of emotional intelligence:

***“Emotional intelligence integrates
Feeling, Thinking and Doing.***

***Emotional intelligence is the practice
of using **Thinking** about **Feeling**,
and **Feeling** about **Thinking**, when **choosing what to Do.**”***

And this is why our emotional intelligence is about attitudes, and therefore why it is changeable and developable in everyone. We really can do something about it, with the right approach.

Fundamental ‘predispositions’

To help us identify our predispositions towards people (including ourselves) in particular, here are two fundamental emotionally intelligent attitudes required of a highly emotionally intelligent person.

The most fundamental attitude that we have is about ourself. A healthy positive attitude toward oneself is:

“I value and accept myself as I am – warts and all!”

This is a positive attitude because it is an evaluative position towards something – in this case me – as a conscious choice based on an integration of my thinking and feeling. It is an attitude towards my being, and does not preclude my wanting to change my patterns of behaviour. In Transactional Analysis (TA) this is known as the ‘I’m OK’ position. It is the position of non-judgment of Self.

Coming from this positive attitude towards our own Self enables us to have a healthy positive attitude about everyone else:

“I accept and value you as you are – even though you may be very different from me.”

This is an attitude because it is an evaluative feeling position towards something, in this case another person. It is an attitude towards your being, and does not mean I cannot evaluate, dislike, or criticise what you do. In TA this is known as the ‘You’re OK’ position, and is the position of non-judgment of others.

The other fundamental attitudes which underlie an emotionally intelligent approach are those stemming from the statements of belief enshrined in the 8 Principles of Emotional Intelligence that Tim Sparrow explores in each issue of this ezine.

Attitudes and Performance

Attitudes, again as we have seen in Tim's articles previously, are one of the key determinants of performance. The KASH model explains this clearly – to perform at our optimum we need to have:

- K**nowledge (the cognitive know-how)
- A**ttitudes (integrated positive thinking and feeling)
- S**kills (the competencies)
- H**abits (consistency in our behaviours)

For example, let's take a look at what it means to be a transformational leader. A good leader will have the knowledge and skills to lead effectively, and will be consistent in their behaviour and performance. To become a transformational leader however, that leader needs to come from a position of unconditional acceptance and valuing of both Self and others, in order to facilitate transformational change. Transformational leadership demands the emotionally intelligent attitudes of 'I'm OK', and 'You're OK'.

Organisational Attitude

Whilst attitudes are held by individuals, often groups of individuals will share attitudes, and these constitute group or organisational norms. An organisation's culture has been described as 'the way we do things around here', and that will be determined by "the attitudes that we have around here".

How employees think and feel about their organisation, and therefore how they choose to behave, is to a large extent a response to the way they perceive they are treated by the organisation. A key responsibility therefore lies with senior management to demonstrate the attitudes that they demand of their staff, in other words, high regard for self and for others, and all that goes with the I'm OK, You're OK position. Richard Harvey explored the impact of leadership on organisational change in his article, Facilitating Organisational Change, in last month's issue.

To create a culture of high performance within an organisation, not only does that organisation need to have the necessary knowledge and skills to perform effectively, but also the positive attitudes and habits that will facilitate achievement.

We will be exploring more about how an organisation's leadership is fundamental to this equation in our January issue.

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