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EXTRACT - FEATURES ARTICLE

In becoming an effective leader *how* one thinks is important: the vital inner side of leadership development!

Research Report by MLQ Network Member and Researcher Tom Cerni

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This invited feature article for 360 degree Feedback summarises his recently internationally published findings about important relationships between *transformational leadership* (using our MLQ short scale) and
a) client rational (thinking) process on the one hand, and
b) experiential (including emotional) processes on the other.

The term emotional intelligence has evoked much interest over the last ten years mainly due to the influence of Daniel Goleman's best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence (EI)*. As valuable as Goleman's contribution has been to our understanding about emotional intelligence it is not without limitation including a failure to appreciate the influence of preconscious, automatic thoughts on emotion. Other limitations of EI, including validity issues have been well articulated by Professor John Antonakis in the February, 2005 newsletter.

Through a comprehensive research program Epstein and his colleagues have developed the Cognitive-experiential Self-theory (CEST) that addresses some of the EI limitations. According to CEST, intellect and emotions are controlled by a rational and experiential system respectively (Epstein, 1998). The **rational system** operates according to logical inference and is conscious, deliberate and relatively emotion-free. This system is reason oriented and attuned to logical connections (Epstein, 1998).

Practice exercise:
Gaining insight about the rational and experiential systems.

The Linda Vignette is an exercise, first introduced by Tversky and Kahneman, that illustrates the difference between the two information-processing systems – the rational and experiential:

"Linda is described a thirty-one-year-old woman who is single, outspoken, and very bright. At university she was a philosophy major who participated in antinuclear demonstrations and was concerned with issues of social justice."

Task: Rank the following possibilities by assigning "1" to the most likely and "3" to the least likely.

Linda is a feminist;   Linda is a bank teller;   and Linda is both.

Now check the answer and comment provided on the back page of this edition of *360 degree Feedback.*

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While the *experiential system* learns directly from experience, is preconscious, operates automatically, and is intimately associated with emotions. Both systems work in parallel, are bi-directional and have a range of influence varying from minimal to almost complete dominance, depending on the context, person, and emotional involvement (Denes-Raj, & Epstein, 1994; Handley, Newstead, & Wright, 2000). Our research explored the connection between the two information-processing systems and the **Full Range Leadership Theory** (Bass & Avolio, 1997) in the educational context.

Study 1 examined the relationship between information-processing and leadership styles. **The rational system shared a positive relationship with transformational leadership and all its subscales.**

In particular -

- both Idealised Influence (attributed - new scale label *Builds Trust*) and Inspirational Motivation (Inspires Others) showed a positive relationship with the analytical, intentional and effortful aspects of the rational system;

- the characteristics of Intellectual Stimulation *(Encourages Innovative Thinking)* also related well to the rational system.

However, while the results showed that the rational system had these *strong positive correlations* with transformational leadership, the experiential system was *weakly correlated* with such leadership.

Study 2 confirmed the strength of the relationship between the rational system and transformational leadership and extended its findings. It was found that a strong positive relationship also existed between the constructive aspects of the experiential system and transformational leadership. Specifically, **global constructive thinking, emotional coping, behavioural coping and their respective subscales were all positively correlated with transformational leadership.**

With the exception of Idealized Influence (attributed - *Builds Trust*), transformational leadership focuses on the behaviour of the leaders (Elliott, 2004). **Results of the second study suggest that transformational leadership may have cognitive underpinnings that are related to behaviour.**

- In an educational setting a transformational leader is likely to think in ways that facilitate effective action (which corresponds with behavioural coping).

- The subscales of behavioural coping suggest that the leader would tend to emphasize the positive side of situations and to think in a manner that makes unpleasant tasks minimally distressing (positive thinking), take effective action when faced with problems (action orientation), and engage in planning and careful thought (conscientiousness) (Epstein, 2001).

Given that the experiential system is associated with affect it seems plausible to associate positive thinking, a subscale of behavioural coping, with positive emotions.

- For example, employees working with supervisors who are high on transformational leadership experienced more positive emotions throughout the workday, including interactions with coworkers and customers (Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007).

This appears to complement our finding of a connection between positive thinking and transformational leadership.

Most people are aware of the rational system because it operates at the conscious level, however, with the experiential system operating automatically, and at the preconscious level, individuals may be unaware of its influence (Epstein, 1998). **It is believed that the rational and experiential systems have several advantages and disadvantages in how they influence each other.**

The advantage of the rational system is that –

- it has the capacity to understand the experiential system when thoughts surface into consciousness.

The advantage of the experiential system is that –

- it can influence the rational system without the rational system being aware of that influence (Epstein, 2006). However the experiential system cannot understand the rational system.

A critical factor underlying leadership may be the degree to which leaders rely on, and are influenced by, each of these systems. Practitioners need to attend to these inner aspects of leadership as they seek to identify, reinforce and develop in their clients more effective leadership.

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Answer: Gaining insight about the *rational* and *experiential* human systems. (see page 1)

If you responded like most people, you would have ranked Linda as being both a feminist and a bank teller ahead of Linda being just a bank teller. In doing so, you would have made a conjunction error, because, according to the conjunction rule, the occurrence of two things cannot be more likely than only one of them.

Comment: People tend to make conjunction error in the Linda problem because the experiential system tends to react to context in a very concrete way. It is unlike the rational system, which operates largely by abstract, situation-free generalizations (Epstein, 1998).

People generally make conjunction errors in the context of personality problems, such as the Linda problem, and less so with probability problems. Some practitioner take-aways –

- **Clients may benefit from understanding their information-processing systems and how it influences their problem solving abilities.**

- **MLQ Facilitators should be alert to how the experiential system can disable the rational system – especially when their clients seek to apply their optimal behaviour plans from MLQ360 assessments in often emotionally-laden contexts.**