

The Impact of Developing Emotional Intelligence

Jane Adshead-Grant in conversation with Sandra Thompson

JA: So welcome everybody, I'm delighted today to be with Sandra Thompson, who has generously given us her time to share more about her thoughts and experiences around the topic of emotional intelligence. Sandra has a huge amount of experience in the customer experience, having worked in corporate environments previously and has a real passion for this topic of emotional intelligence, through both her own study and now as the first Daniel Goldman accredited coach in the UK and so we are hugely privileged to have her join us this afternoon. So Sandra, welcome, great to have you here.

ST: Thank you, it is a real privilege and an honour, thank you for inviting me.

JA: Well look, I wondered if we could get started if you were kind enough just to share a little bit of your background in terms of, how did you get involved in the study and teaching of emotional intelligence?

ST: Do you know it is a great question because in fact I only realised a few months ago that I've been talking about and learning about emotional intelligence for about 18 years, I mean I know I don't look that old, right, but the fact is that I chose emotional intelligence for my topic for a masters degree.

I was doing Strategic Communications at Greenwich and this book had come out, this Daniel Goldman book that basically said, 'I know you think that IQ is really important but it is the EQ, the emotional intelligence that matters, and instantly I was just like, 'That's a thing, that's got to be interesting,' so I studied it then and then I was brought back to it about 18 months ago when the college where I teach invited me to write an academic paper but of course all those years on there's so much more about it, it has been spoken about more, more papers, more books, and when I completed that paper I then thought, well, cognitively I know this stuff but from what I'm reading it creates transformation change, transformational change, and so I signed myself out to the Goldman course and 14, 15 months later, it has been exactly what I thought it might be and more, so it is exciting.

JA: Of course, as you were saying there, there's such a lot written about emotional intelligence and so I'm wondering from your perspective, what do you think are the top three things that someone should know about the impact of developing our emotional intelligence?

ST: The thing that I think struck me, and I think the thing that stands true in this environment we're in right now is that sense of peace and calm. Before I started working for myself I worked for a number of different organisations where actually I was quite determined and gung-ho and working at pace and actually that brought about quite a lot of stress and in actual fact what I've learned in the time that I've been practicing emotional intelligence as a skill is that you can choose

to have a difference life, you don't have to choose stress and anxiety, you can manage your emotions much more effectively. That's one thing.

The second thing is the ripple effect. Emotional intelligence is talked about as a leadership skill quite often but in actual fact, what is not written as much is around how it changes all of your relationships so you may have really good relationships, but in actual fact some of the skills that you're taught, particularly around listening, you know that better than I do, it enriches the relationships that you have and it actually enables you to invest in those that are best for you. I don't know how to explain that but it just means that you put your focus on the reciprocal partnerships, relationships, and they just become far more fruitful and I wasn't expecting that, I really wasn't expecting that. That is the second one.

The last one is, as far as impact, there are numerous studies now that have proven those people who have emotional intelligence actually perform better and make more and quite often people are surprised by that. They think it is soft skills and it is very nice, you've always got to be really nice. Places like L'Oreal, sales people at L'Oreal, those people who have emotional intelligence as well as IQ can be earning 100,000 more a year because they have that ability to influence far more effectively.

JA: Wow, that is incredible. As you share those three key things, you know, to have more peace in your life, to experience deeper relationships and to be able to perform at your best and then get paid for it as well, I am thinking, who wouldn't want to invest in developing more of their emotional intelligence. It is kind of a no-brainer really. I guess for that, I'm thinking about for our listeners, what would you say is the best way to get started in developing your emotional intelligence?

ST: Another great question. I think the thing that made the most significant difference to me was when I was invited to choose to respond or to react and that is actually, when I first heard the question I thought, 'This is ridiculous, of course I'm going to react to stuff because that is what I do,' but when I thought about it, and I gave it a moment to percolate, I realised that reaction can sometimes lead me to regret some of the things that I've done. I'm not really being present and really giving the response that is in best service to the situation.

Often when we react it's an instant survival mode. That is quite often what happens. That isn't always what is most productive and progressive in the situation. If you think about your day and you think about the times when you've taken a moment to respond and compare it to those moments when you have reacted then I think you'll start to see that when you make that choice to respond, things are a little bit calmer. We had an exercise where we would reflect on the day, at the end of the day you'd write a quick list of those things that you'd reacted to, those that you'd responded to and then you start to retrain your brain so reaction isn't really the way, so maybe that is an idea.

JA: As you share with me, what comes to mind, Sandra, is sometimes when we see or witness people who are emotional at that moment and they tend to react from a position of emotion and that often leads to that regret, whereas we think of somebody as responding they are acting with a more logical mindset. What would you say to that?

ST: I would say that there is always a place for instant reaction. When your safety is at risk you have to rely on the immediacy of your body saying, 'It's fight or flight, crack on, you've got to get out of here,' that sort of thing. But when you have a moment to consider what's really going on, what that means is that the emotion that you instantly feel might not be the real emotion that's really going on, which is, if I think for a moment, and a couple of months ago I lost my rag, very angry, but then I considered what caused me to be angry and it was actually the threat of something potentially happening and if I had decided to respond and if I'd thought about, this is what the emotion is, but where's that coming from, I would've realised what I could say to that person is, 'The reason why I'm upset with this is because I'm frightened that you might be harmed,' rather than angry, which then creates tension.

JA: Gosh, that's so interesting and I can see how that kind of interaction would really deepen our relationships with one another because it comes to that point about us being self-aware, taking that moment to check in with ourselves and also being aware of the other in terms of that interpersonal relationship. That kind of exchange seems very meaningful and effective.

ST: Just quickly, it is also the basis of trust. When you have someone who you, who is listening to you and is kind of considering what this whole this is around you build more trust because they feel more safe. You've got to rebuild a load of stuff when you react, I think, rather than if you respond, you have perhaps more conversation.

JA: So in your experience, how long does it take someone to begin to develop the skills of emotional intelligence?

ST: So there's a number of answers to this. I am a little bit skeptical of people who go on two hour courses and I can say that from a point where I've seen those courses offered to people I know very well and they're like, 'I'm going to learn all about it. I'm going to do two hours on Wednesday.' Wow. The thing about emotional intelligence is that what you're doing when you're competent in it and you're confident in it is you've actually reprogrammed some of the parts of your brain. Neuroplasticity is the opportunity for us to start changing some of the pathways that are within our brain. I think the short answer to your question is I've started to see with the coachees that I have, quite significant changes in around 12 weeks. I start to see stuff after six but really you see different types of language, you see the pre-empting of something coming up after 12 weeks and there is an important part in that, which is you need to practice. You really need to practice. The brain is an organ, it's not a muscle, but if you think about it being a muscle, in order for you to become fit to run a sprint super fast you've got to keep practice and that's really what you're doing. I'd say people can see stuff a bit, some things within six but some really big stuff within 12.

JA: Thank you for that. You're talking about the clients you're working with and so I'm wondering will what you do with clients through the coaching that you offer and the teaching, will it work, what you teach and coach, will it work for anyone in any sector?

ST: It will. The interesting thing that I'm finding is that some sectors are searching for this now. I'm going to give you an example of the legal profession. Law firms, the people within law firms, are mostly rewarded through their cognitive ability and of course they're dealing with emotion day in, day out. You have joy and despair and fear and all sorts of stuff so they're dealing with it, but the customers they have, the clients they have, find that while they're very technically expert they just don't have the people skills, the human touch in many cases, to really build that trust so I think it's applied everywhere but I think that there are a couple of sectors where we will see quite substantial difference and in actual fact when we think about AI coming in, some sectors are at threat, and without having more of that human touch you wonder what their actual offering might be so it's an investment for them to create those much longer term, proactive relationships.

JA: You talked about AI just then. It dawns on me now that of course as we begin to reemerge from this crisis, coming through this pandemic, how we see many articles, and many organizations are really blending the capability of technology and humanity and so helping people discern and perhaps even through this crisis we have seen more aspects, if you like, of emotional intelligence that's coming from others from within. So I wonder coming back to your experience if you have an example or a case study or somebody you could share with us in terms of who you've worked with, how you've helped them develop their emotional intelligence, some of the things that you might've done to help them.

ST: I'm going to pick out two. I'm going to pick out one which was one individual who had a perception that something was going on and it was holding her back and in fact it was preventing her from being happy at work so there were a couple of individuals who were behaving in a certain way and she had looked for everything that they do to add evidence to the perception she had in her mind and so then over time we talked about whether she needed to believe everything that she thought. Was it necessary to believe everything that she was thinking? Just that question percolated with her for a while and she then started to see a much broader set of behaviours, which meant that some of the things these individuals were doing did not fit with the perception that she had so it enabled to her to look more broadly and to change the relationship she had at work. She started to be less defensive.

She started to engage a bit more in the behaviours in that didn't fit with the perception she had in the first place. It is difficult to talk about it because it is confidential but the ultimate outcome was instead of her dreading going into the office, she went in with a mind of curiosity, which then meant that eventually she felt much happier and fully contributing in her workplace.

The other example I have, which is quite nice, is using metaphors to help people visualise the choices that they have, to take the idea out of their mind so that they can visualise the choices

that they can take. This is an example where I had a client who had five things that he quite liked to do. Some things more than others so we created this, it was like a campsite with different tents representing each of the choices that he had and then we went into elaborate detail as to what those tents were like.

It sounds a bit fluffy but by the articulation of what each of those looked like, he was much better able to evaluate which ones he then wanted to go forth with and actually a couple of the tents got taken down, which was great, which was what he wanted. It's using descriptive techniques, asking great questions that seem to enable people to make a shift in their mind. People just get in a rut and just asking particular questions, getting them to visualise certain things helps them see things from a different perspective.

JA: What I appreciated about these two examples, I can imagine some of our listeners relating to those, especially when we get stuck in terms of the first in terms of, are we choosing to believing a certain thing about a certain situation or a certain person and how actually by challenging those beliefs and recreating something different, a deepening of our own self-awareness, and then on the second one I really appreciate this idea of visualisation, I guess just allowing people to tap into the different modalities to help them again have a different perception, a different view, and then make better decisions and I was interested in actually the impact of emotional intelligence on decision making. I wondered if you might talk to that a little bit and what's your experience of the impact of strong emotional intelligence on our capacity to make decisions.

ST: There's a few things around how much emotion influences your decisions. There's some studies that were done last year by a chap called Gerald, I can't remember his surname for a minute, it's gone from me, but 95% of the decisions that we make are emotional and so if we are able to at least consider the reason why we are thinking the way we think and this gets a bit convoluted because we do our thinking with our conscious mind apparently but actually what's really going on is it's all decisions that have already been made in your unconscious mind.

Where am I going with this? I think that being emotionally intelligent means that you are able to label the emotions that you're feeling, which will then help you understand what's going on and also I think that your ability to help the decision follow through, so this is influence, this is getting people on board, this is being able to receive feedback, whether that's verbal, non-verbal, whatever it is, you're more likely to understand how someone is receiving the proposition that you have, the proposal that you have, and when you have that sensitivity, it means again you ask really great questions. If you're not paying to that micro-expression that just happened where someone was not too sure for a second and then they remembered they needed not to look like that so they put on another facial expression, it's being able to see things like that, which you become far more attuned to. Does that answer your question?

JA: It does, and again it just makes such a powerful case for us to invest for us to development our emotional intelligence, given that each and every day somewhere between 300 and 1000

decisions a day, whether they are the tiny ones from when we get up in the morning on what we are going to wear to a more significant decision that impacts our work and the lives of others.

ST: There is definitely something in there as well around intention and purpose and I certainly think that with the work that I've done and the course that I've been on, being able to tune into and just to remember what you're meant to be doing, because you feel whether it's right or it's wrong through having that anchor, the kind of compass that you get, that also helps make decisions much faster, I think. That is certainly my experience of it.

JA: That would be mine too when I think about when we have the self-awareness to know what's important to us, so our values and if we are able to be congruent and behave in ways that honour our values, it serves a much more speedy, more efficient way of making decisions because we are honouring who we are. So I wonder is there one, and this might be a tough question, but is there one secret that you could share about the impact of emotional intelligence that could really help other people?

ST: One secret about the impact. I can tell you a secret.

JA: Yes, go for it.

ST: So I learned this when I was writing the academic and I had to read it twice because I just thought, 'Who knows this? Don't tell anyone.' What I learnt is that the original design of emotional design that was designed by a couple of guys out in the States, but it wasn't Daniel Goldman himself, the way they designed it, it was intelligence. It was recognised by another amazing scholar, a guy called Gardner, who recognised it as another intelligence, but what happened was Goldman, when he came along, he added additional parts to the original model, which actually means it is actually not an intelligence but that is where you see the emergence of ideas like emotional agility.

There's a lady called Susan David who writes about emotional agility, a phenomenal piece of work, and she doesn't get all focused on whether it's an intelligence or whether it's not but what she does talk about, which I think is very interesting, is whether or not the term 'emotional intelligence' puts a lot of people off because of intelligence not being accessible to all so that's why she wrote her book about emotional agility, but you heard it here. It's not really technically in the scientific world an intelligence but I'm going with it.

JA: Wonderful. I love that. Thanks for sharing that secret. In your experience now, what are, and this may be one of them actually, what are some of the common problems or challenges that you see in others as they seek to develop further this emotional capacity, intelligence, agility?

ST: I think there's a few things. I think the first thing is number one, identifying this thing which will help them. I think a lot of people have a perception that it's empathy or it's about being nice, when in actual fact if they were able to have the big grid of the 12 competencies explained to

them in some detail, I think they would understand the benefits of the skill in more detail. I think that's one thing. There's lots of people I meet who say, 'I know emotional intelligence. It's empathy, right?' That's just one of the 12 so I think it might be misunderstood, I think that might be one thing.

The second thing, I think, is time. Coming back to a point I made earlier around practice and repetition, certainly, cognitively, remember I was saying I knew it cognitively, academically I knew it, I read the books, it was all great, but I hadn't experienced what it could do for me as an individual and that does take repetition and it does take time so I absolutely had to get into a routine of every morning I would do Y and every evening I would do X. I had to carve out that time to make sure I was disciplined to go through the practices and certainly some people that I've met, it's not considered life changing, because they haven't had any life changing experiences yet so other things get piled in and it goes down the priority list, but for those who can keep connected, then they start seeing their results and then they're totally in it.

I think it's that and I think it's allowing yourself to be a bit vulnerable. So I'm very, very lucky that the coaches that I've had have trusted me to go to places that perhaps they've not been to before and I think that just letting, a bit like abseiling, once you've got over that little ridge then you're fine, but having the courage to get to that point, that's when the magic happens.

JA: That's incredible and you've begun to share there what others could do to overcome some of those challenges so this time issue, that being a challenge, but I heard you say there breaking down into small steps and little practices and little anchors that will help you to begin to build these skills so they become habit, and you talked about the 12 competencies there. Just for some of our listeners who may not be as familiar with the Daniel Goldman framework, I think they are set into four key areas and then broken down, is that right?

ST: Yes, that's right.

JA: Could you share the key areas when we talk about, empathy is one of them, it is just one of the 12.

ST: If you can imagine a grid and there are four headings, those four headings are what are called domains. That is the academic coming out in me. The first part everyone really needs as a foundation is emotional self-awareness, so not surprisingly that first box is self-awareness and when I looked at that I just thought, I know who I am and that's fine but it is around recognising the emotions that come up in you and how those emotions influence your behaviour.

The next one that you have is around self-management and that's your decision to influence the behaviours that show up, so actually when something comes in you, do you choose to continue with it or do you choose to let it go or do you write about it? How do you managed those emotions? You have things in there around adaptability. You have things in there around positive outlook. These are choices. We have choices that we make every day. You can see half full, you

can see half empty, that's your choice, but this is all around how you develop the skills to make the choices that serve you and to serve others.

The third of the four is around social awareness and that's where the empathy, a great big chunk in the empathy section, and that's three different types of empathy that you go into quite a lot of detail about. Then we have organizational awareness within that, which is again around the networks, who sits where, who does what, and finally it is relationship management. That is really where you start to see the fruit of all of the work that you've put in, in the previous three areas. That's coaching and mentoring, it's inspirational leadership, it's a bit about, it's really around how you show up and how things happen for the benefit of not only you but for the other person that you're with.

JA: Well, thank you for sharing that because as you share that with me it comes back to where we started in terms of this idea of emotional intelligence, why should we invest in it, is that it's not only helping us develop ourselves as human beings, it enables us to have a more peaceful and calm lifestyle, it enables us to make better decisions for ourselves and others and this idea of deepening relationships with others so that we can experience better exchanges and better quality of life when we think about every day we spend in relationship with someone, somewhere at some point, so thank you for sharing those areas. Just before we begin to wrap up, is there a question that I haven't asked you that you would like to answer.

ST: One question comes up a lot and it might be that someone who's watching this thinks it to, so I'll raise that one. I get asked a lot, 'Well, you know, surely that's a time when you're too old to learn this skill. There must be a time when it's just like, forget it, what's the point.' The answer I have to that is, when I was out in Vienna doing some of my learning experiences there were people who were 22, there were people who were 71, so it's actually more around your mindset so if you are receptive and you are learning and you're curious, those are the things, the number that you are is completely relevant. That comes up quite a lot.

Then the other thing that often comes up is, how can I be emotionally intelligent when the people around me are not? How can I do that? And I have a few answers for them. I'll say that don't underestimate the ripple effect, because what you find often is that you have one catalyst who starts to behave slightly differently and then people start to behave quite differently. You see that when you have new members of a team coming in or a new leader coming in. There's definitely a change there, which I think, if you have the ability to show up as you wish to show up then I think it will be fine. The other flip side to that is if it's intolerable, there's no change, then I think you're probably in the wrong organization.

JA: Wow, that's great insight and very useful, I think, for people to hear some of the myths around our capacity to develop our emotional intelligence. It's not about age, it's more about our mindset and that actually we can be this wonderful ripple effect if we begin to employ these skills, many of which you shared with us today. Sandra, if people would love to know more about you

and how to get hold of you, you've got so many wonderful articles I've enjoyed reading and also YouTube and some of your webinars. Where would people most easily contact you?

ST: LinkedIn is the best first stop, mostly because I'm on it every day. It's like the equivalent of Facebook for those people who still do Facebook every day and the reason why I think LinkedIn would be a good place is because not only do I write my own things, I'll be commenting on the wonderful and really inspirational content that so many other people have to say on this topic. Check me out there. The key is to look for CX Educator as the first line because there's a few Sandra Thompson's, can you believe that, but CX Educator will be me.

JA: Wonderful. I really appreciate your wisdom and gifts and sharing with us this afternoon and real inspiration, giving this real sense of hope in terms of the impact of what us investing more in emotional intelligent can give us for the benefit of all so thanks so much.

ST: You're very welcome, it's been a pleasure, thank you.