

“DOES HE HAVE THE SMARTS TO DO THAT JOB?”

It’s a recurring question from clients. The query may be about a staff member I’ve interviewed or have conversed with for another reason. On other occasions my client might say, “I’ve got a new project, and I’m wondering about Jean. . . . would you mind talking to her and let me know what you think about her ability?”

I never get the final say—and shouldn’t. But most managers look for confirming, or disconfirming insights from trusted colleagues or consultants. What a manager actually wants is an assessment of a worker’s intelligence—his brainpower--although the language used is “smarts” or “street savvy.” Technically, smarts and intelligence are synonymous, but experience requires me to caution that *intelligence* is not politically correct terminology. Still, understanding the business use of intelligence is a highly useful objective, especially since the new neuroscience tells us that genes don’t determine our destiny and we have the opportunity to build our intelligence. Indeed, we change our brains and our brains change us every day. And so I intend to look closely at what is meant by business intelligence.

What is work intelligence?

Bob Sternberg, former IBM Professor of Psych at Yale, studied people’s use of business intelligence—research I’ve found very useful for mentoring executives.¹ Sternberg wanted to understand what managers and execs mean when they talk about business smarts: he wanted to identify the behaviors of an ideally intelligent business person.

Sternberg’s research focuses on *implicit theories*. A *theory*, in this study, is a *belief followed as a basis for action*. So implicit theories are notions—often unconscious—that people yield to in their behaviors. Sternberg developed a questionnaire for 70 business professors from various schools asking them to list characteristics of an ideally intelligent individual. For a second questionnaire, a group of 40 laypersons from New Haven—not Yale students—were asked to rate hypothetical persons in letters of recommendation. The results for experts and laypersons were remarkably similar which confirmed that an implicit theory of business smarts is widely held and deeply consistent throughout the business population.

He also compared the implicit theories of intelligence in business, art, philosophy and physics—and found that they differ according to vocation, giving credence to the idea that business has its own brand of intelligence. A summary of the study conclusions regarding business intelligence emphasizes:

- Problem solving skills: thinks logically, focuses on the essential issues, follows others’ thinking easily and knows where they’re going with their ideas.
- Creativity: comes up with and explores new ideas, especially as they relate to novel business services or products—escapes the traps of conventional thinking.
- Judgment: mature insight into decision-making.
- Self-awareness: knows the breadth and limits of knowledge and expertise.
- Strategy: possesses a long-term perspective on business issues.
- Decision-making: knows when to act and not to act.
- Reality: distinguishes substance from style, and appreciates the ideas of others.

In short, intelligence for the business worker is about problem-solving, decision-making, and personal awareness.

So what?

This research can do quite a bit more for you than merely articulate the lay of the land and develop a shared understanding of work smarts. It provides you with the common filters needed for assessing performance. It's also a list of the key factors that managers use to select and recruit staff for new and/or different opportunities. Furthermore, the model can be used for shaping self-advocacy and impression management in the work setting.

More than likely your boss may be somewhat clueless regarding your smarts. Managers are responsible for a lot of objectives and a lot of people, so that's no surprise. Although effective execs in a few of the prominent American companies take the time and effort to manage relations with their subordinates and keep tab on their people's interests, expertise and work smarts, they are still few in number. However, most workers and managers assume an "almost passively reactive stance" toward their bosses. In a classic work, Gabarro and Kotter² emphasized the necessity of keeping your manager knowledgeable of your strengths and weaknesses, your needs and interests and your personal objectives. Because employees fail to keep their managers informed, their talents may be ignored. Such a position almost always hurts you—and the company. Sternberg's research goes even further than Gabarro and Kotter, and explains what bosses are looking for.

Strategic career development includes a regular updating of your manager on your work intelligence. Sternberg's model provides a means—an infrastructure—for gaining feedback, building dependability and honesty and making it possible for your boss to keep his finger not only on your needs as well as the best opportunities for your future. Be sure to manage the impression your boss forms of you and learn to advocate for yourself so your boss can answer the questions himself about your street or business smarts.

¹ Sternberg, Robert J. (1985) Implicit Theories of Intelligence, Creativity, and Wisdom. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 49(3): 607-627.

² Gabarro, John J. and John P. Kotter (1980) Managing Your Boss. *Harvard Business Review*. 58(1): 92-100.