Book Review

Successful Intelligence: how practical and creative intelligence determine success in life by Robert J. Sternberg (NY: Penguin Putnam, 1997)

Throughout my life I have been interested in intelligence, mine and that of others. From early years at Taft School where I was regularly described as a "gross underachiever" to later in my work life when I began to understand that "smarts" came in all shapes and sizes, intelligence has been an interesting issue. Who has it and how can you figure out what kind each person has?

Successful Intelligence (SI) presents an interesting addition to my own practical knowledge of intelligence and a further jumping-off point from Howard Gardner's efforts in **Frames of Mind: the theory of multiple intelligences.**

The preface gives away the whole story. Let me quote a bit:

"Successful intelligence is the kind of intelligence used to achieve important goals. People who succeed, whether by their own standards or by other people's, are those who have managed to acquire, develop, and apply a full range of intellectual skills, rather than merely relying on the inert intelligence that schools so value. These individuals may or may not succeed on conventional test, but they have something in common that is much more important than high test scores. They know their strengths; they know their weaknesses. They capitalize on their strengths; they compensate for or correct their weaknesses. That's it." (bold in text) (p. 12)

So, this is quite an invigorating start! Intelligence is something we use in day-to-day life.

The first half of SI takes up a review and critique of traditional efforts to define and measure human intelligence. For those of us who followed the uproar over **The Bell Curve** (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994) or have otherwise been exposed to critiques of standard approaches to intelligence, skip quickly to Part III "Successful Intelligence Is What Counts".

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SI posits three key elements of successful intelligence:

* analytical
* creative, and
* practical intelligence

Analytical intelligence focuses on problem solving. SI discusses this under the following headings:

* Problem recognition
* Problem definition
* Formulating a strategy for problem solving
* Representing information
* Allocating resources
* Monitoring and evaluation
* Well-structured and ill-structured problems
* means-ends analysis
* working forward
* working backward
* generating and testing
* Mental sets and fixation
* Decision Making
* economic models
* utility models
* game theory
* satisficing

Creative intelligence focuses on finding good problems. Here SI struggles to develop a coherent and satisfying definition for creative intelligence by posing an "investment theory of creativity". Unfortunately, this discussion struggles with a metaphor standing in as a definition: "Creatively intelligent people are like investors. They buy low and sell high." This line of argument leads to the following notion of what creativity is about:

"In the investment view of creativity, then, the creative person buys low - comes up with an idea that is likely to be rejected and derided. That person then attempts to convince other people of the value of the idea and thus increase the perceived value of the investment. If he has finally convinced others of its value, the creative person sells high - leaves the idea to others and moves on to the next unpopular idea." (p.190-191)

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From my perspective and experiences in the business world, this gives much too much importance to the Don Quixote aspects of the process. What exactly is the "investment" here? Is it really true that creative people set out to be "rejected"? (Perhaps, some reading in the literature of innovation in industry might be helpful here. Although these are looking at the problem of creativity from a more macro level, Eric von Hippel's **Sources of Innovation** and Everret Roger's **Diffusion of Innovations** might shed some light on creativity.)

Leaving aside my quibbles about the difficulties SI has with defining creative intelligence, this chapter closes with a set of observations about how to develop creative intelligence. The section headings provide a good slice though these (paraphrased here):

Successfully intelligent people:

* actively seek out, and later become, role models
* question assumptions and encourage others to do so
* allow themselves and others to make mistakes
* take sensible risks and encourage others to do the same
* seek out for themselves and others tasks that allow for creativity
* actively define and redefine problems, and help others to do so.
* seek rewards for, and themselves reward, creativity
* allow themselves and others the time to think creatively
* tolerate ambiguity and encourage tolerance of ambiguity in others
* understand the obstacles creative people must face and overcome
* are willing to grow
* recognize the importance of the person-environment fit

The discussion of **practical intelligence** is altogether too brief because too much of this chapter is taken up with further efforts to debunk various standing notions of the connection between standard views of intelligence and real world success.

"Practical problems are characterized by, among other things, an apparent absence of the exact information necessary for solution and also by their relevance to everyday experience." This leads to a discussion of the roll of "tacit" knowledge. BUT, SI's use of the word "tacit" bears little resemblance to either my own usage or a dictionary definition (in this case my usage and the dictionary are in good synch).

"What, exactly, is tacit knowledge? It has three characteristic features. First, tacit knowledge is about knowing how - about doing. It is procedural in nature. Second, it is relevant to the attainment of goals people value, not the kind of academic drivel without

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practical value that teachers sometimes try to stuff in students' heads. And, third, it is typically acquired with little help from others." (p. 236)

Now, if we strip out SI's confusing use of the word "tacit" (perhaps you may want to substitute "practical" or "worldly"), we now have a statement about that body of knowledge that one gains through the actions, association,and activities of day-to-day life - the world of knowledge accumulated through work, hobbies, social interactions and play. Go back and reread the paragraph quoted above. Excise "tacit" and substitute "worldly". Now we can see what SI is trying to say. I have more than a small quibble with SI's third feature. In my experience, most of my "worldly" knowledge was directly or indirectly gathered from the people around me. This usually occurred in an expressly "helping" mode.

Although SI is hardly a comprehensive or mature statement of exactly what successful intelligence is or how we can encourage its development, it at least moves the discussion of intelligence onto a plane where we can think of intelligence as a poly-dimensional entity. This gets us beyond the intellectually barren territory of IQ and other such nonsense. Further, SI helps to move us towards notions that can support practical thinking and policy making to support increasing the body of successful intelligence in all human beings.

Viewing this from my personal perspective as a business manager, I could not help but note the immense surface overlap between SI's description of successful intelligence and many of the underlying principles ascribed to high-performance organizations. Here, for example, are statements (bolded in the SI text) from the discussion of Problem Solving:

> "Successfully intelligent people don't wait for problems to hit them over the head. They recognize their existence before they get out of hand and begin the process of solving them."(p. 158)
>
> "Successfully intelligent people define problems correctly and thereby solve those problems that really confront them, rather than extraneous ones. In this way, the same problems don't keep coming back into their lives. They also make the effort to decide which problems are worth solving, in the first place, and which aren't." (p. 160-161)
>
> "Successfully intelligent people carefully formulate strategies for problem solving. In particular, they focus on long-range planning rather than rushing in and then later having to rethink their strategies." (p. 163)

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> "Successfully intelligent people represent information about a problem as accurately as possible, with a focus on how they can use that information effectively." (p.165)
>
> "Successfully intelligent people think carefully about allocating resources, for both the short term and the long term. They consider the risk-reward ratios and then choose allocations that they believe will maximize their return." (p. 169)
>
> "Successfully intelligent people do not always make the correct decisions, but they monitor and evaluate their decisions and then correct their errors as they discover them." (p. 170-171)

Now, if you substitute the words "successful companies" or "successful organizations" for "successfully intelligent people, you will get a set of useful statements about high-performance organizations. Hmmmm…

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