

## Book Review

Ecological Intelligence: The Hidden Impact of What We Buy, by Daniel Goleman, New York: Broadway Books, 2010, 273 pp.

Environmental awareness has been touted as an important factor in promoting sound environmental practices. It (environmental awareness) is increasingly being seen an important driver of good environmental practices as well as boosting organisational environmental performance. This book is interesting as it places environmental awareness in a unique platform of discussion referring to it as Ecological Intelligence (EI). According to Goleman (2010), “Ecology refers to an understanding of organisms and their ecosystems, and intelligence connects the capacity to learn from experience and deals with the efficiency in the environment” (p. 43). Using the concept of EI, this book critically examines and discusses this interesting approach in relation to environmental issues.

This book is organised into 16 subtopics. In the introduction, Daniel Goleman highlights the central theme of the book namely, Radical Transparency (RT). RT refers to society having complete knowledge of the implications of consumerism on the planet as a whole. Goleman also explains how changes in societal behaviour towards a greener society can promote environmental innovation. The second subtopic contends that society is trapped in a ‘green fantasy’ and emphasises that the bursting of the fantasy bubble will allow society to move away from the fuzzy definition of green. The subsequent subtopic sheds some light on this by emphasising the need to address significant environmental issues compared with society’s meager and piece meal efforts in reducing their carbon footprint. In subtopic four, EI is discussed in detail and the author stresses that it is important for society to have increased sensitivity towards the hidden consequences of its actions on the environment. Collective EI can be effective and it is important to group environmental impacts into three different categories namely, geosphere, biosphere, and sociosphere; this is described in subtopic five. Subtopics 6-8 discuss the RT concept in depth in relation to industries, research, environmental tools such as Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), and expert views mainly from the fields of ecology, psychology, economy and business. The first part of the book emphasises that RT can overcome asymmetric information between consumer and companies, thus reducing environmental harm and inhibiting the survival of green-washing. The second part examines consumers who take proactive steps in making environmentally-sound consumption choices. The final part analyses how RT can be brought to

a whole new level by utilising cyberspace. The speed with which information travels on the cyberspace will ensure environmental consciousness is quickly escalated. These three subtopics are designed and structured in a manner to prompt readers to naturally start re-evaluating their green behaviours and the green knowledge stock that they have accumulated thus far.

Subtopic nine illustrates that EI has the power to pressure the industries to embrace green values. It discusses groundbreaking discoveries of means and ways to solve environmental problems. Subtopic 10 explains that consumers' inclinations towards green products are an essential driver for greening the industries. Subtopic 11 discusses ways industries have transformed human beings into a chemical absorption sponge of their byproducts. The solution to this problem is discussed in subtopic 12. Though nothing much can be done with the chemicals that are already in the human system further absorption of these chemicals can be prevented. This subtopic is very interesting as the author uses a neural network perspective to discuss how societal alertness towards green consumption can be increased. The challenges ahead due to increasing EI is discussed in subtopics 13-15 supported by industrial case studies. Subtopic 13 assesses how increased EI will amplify efforts in greening the industries. The author also cleverly assesses the changes in the industrial structure and its escalating costs to the industries. Subtopic 14 examines the ecological upgrading that has taken place and how consumers, producers, government and institutions are responding to ecological transparency. RT is a complex process and therefore it is important for ecological upgrading to be done the right way i.e. high eco-efficiency which is the insight of subtopic 15. The message is that during the course of greening the world, society should not commit further harm to the environment. The final subtopic 16 insists that the response to RT must be ethical and the change should be meaningful (not idiosyncratic or halfhearted). Society has to take genuine steps in making the world a better place to live.

Reviewing this book intrigued me to address two important issues relating to environmental awareness. First, consumers who are better educated have a higher likelihood to buy green products. Therefore, increasing the level of EI will automatically increase the level of environmental awareness in the society as well as boost the demand for greener products. Second, market pressure is vital for industries to adopt healthy environmental practices. Hence, green consumer practices will pressure the industries to produce environmentally-safer products and use cleaner technologies. Goleman has cast some light on both these issues and stressed that RT is the solution. He also elucidates that high levels of environmental awareness can drive collaboration among companies, governments and institutions in finding solutions to long term environmental problems.

In exploring EI, the book views different companies and countries. The take on EI of other countries could have been discussed in a little more depth. Since culture and ideology vary from one country to another, it may contribute to some interesting insights into EI. Future study can explore how and if EI can be measured, and used as an environmental indicator.

In sum, this book is has many interesting case studies which are intelligently discussed to develop, examine and analyses concepts relating to EI. This book is a recommended read, as it portrays environmental issues from a new paradigm.

## References

- Amsden, A.H. (1985) “The Division of Labour is Limited by the Rate of Growth of the Market: the Taiwan Machine Tool Industry in the 1970s”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 9(3): 271-284.
- Cai, W., and Zhou, X. (2014) “On the drivers of Eco-Innovation: Empirical Evidence from China”, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 79:239–248, doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2014.05.035.
- Goleman, D. (2010) *Ecological Intelligence: The Hidden Impacts of What We Buy*, Random House: LLC.
- Huang, P., Zhang, X and Deng, X. (2006) “Survey and Analysis of Public Environmental Awareness and Performance in Ningbo, China : A Case Study on Household Electrical and Electronic Equipment”, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 14(18):1635–1643, doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2006.02.006.
- Qu, Y., Liu, Y., Nayak, R. R. and Li, M. (2015) “Sustainable Development of Eco-Industrial Parks in China: Effects of Managers’ Environmental Awareness on the Relationships Between Practice and Performance”, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 87:328–338, doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2014.09.015.
- Yalabik, B., and Fairchild, R. J. (2011) “Customer, Regulatory, and Competitive Pressure as Drivers of Environmental Innovation”, *International Journal of Production Economics*, 131(2):519–527, doi:10.1016/j.ijpe.2011.01.020.

Keshminder Singh Jit Singh  
Faculty of Business Management  
University Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Email: keshmindersingh82@yahoo.com