





Empathy in the workplace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, is an important skill to have when we are working with other people. Whether it's getting the job done or making people feel like they are part of your organization, studies have demonstrated that empathy is a desirable trait for leaders. Luckily, effort and practice can help develop this skill.



Empathy is the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes and understand his or her thoughts and feelings, to view and experience the world as the other person views and experiences the world.

Consider the following scenario: Jack, Joseph and John all work for a major manufacturing company. Jack is the outgoing chief operations officer (COO). He has worked for the company for 30 years and is in the process of retiring. He reports directly to Joseph, the president of the company, who has asked Jack to work with them as a consultant for one additional year to help train John, the incoming COO.

Joseph, the president, holds a monthly executive roundtable to give all senior executives important updates. It is customary for outgoing executives (serving as consultants during their transition to full retirement, as in this case) to continue attending these roundtables. Jack is planning to follow this precedent and attend the meetings for the duration of his one-year consultancy.

In a private conversation, John, in his first month as COO, tells Joseph that he does not want Jack, the retiring COO, to attend the monthly roundtables because John thinks this will imply that he is not capable of standing on his own two feet. Joseph does not explore the situation or discuss it with Jack. In fact, the president does not even call Jack to ask him not to attend the meetings. Instead, he asks John to call Jack and inform him that he will no longer be attending the meetings.

Understandably, Jack is hurt by this incident. He feels like his investment of 30 years helping grow the company has no value to Joseph. After all, the company president did not even bother to have a conversation with him about the situation. This one incident severely impacts his relationship with Joseph and with John (who Jack is in the process of training) and creates negative feelings toward the company as a whole.

Jack feels roadblocks have been erected to obstruct his working with the company going forward. From his perspective, no one looked at the big picture and considered his point of view

or his feelings. The following thoughts run through his mind: What about my 30 years of service helping to grow this company? What about the fact that I am expected to have an ongoing working relationship with John and with Joseph? Why should I care about them when they clearly do not care about me?

Jack's willingness to invest in the company by fully immersing himself in the training process as a consultant is affected. Three months later he resigns, feeling unappreciated and taking all his valuable knowledge about the history of operations and best practices with him.

In the above scenario, Joseph and John show a clear lack of empathy. Neither of them considered how Jack might feel about being left out of the monthly executive roundtables, and this lack of consideration damaged a 30-year relationship between the organization and a key employee. Regrettably, situations such as this occur often in daily organizational life, damaging relationships between managers and employees, hampering relationships among peers and negatively affecting relationships with customers.

Therefore, let's look at what we mean by the term empathy, how empathy is measured, why it is important to organizations and how it can be developed.

Fully understanding empathy

Webster's collegiate dictionary defines empathy as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner."

This definition captures the two aspects of empathy that researchers have explored. There is a cognitive (or thought) component to empathy. In the scenario described above, a higher level of empathy would have helped Joseph intellectually understand that not inviting Jack to the meeting likely would lead to a feeling of hurt and rejection.

There is also an affective (or feeling)

component to empathy. In the above scenario, if Joseph were demonstrating a higher level of empathy, he would have been able to relate to Jack's feeling of rejection, perhaps remember a time in the past when he felt rejected and how uneasy that made him feel. In its fullest form, empathy encompasses both thought and feeling. It is the ability to understand a person's thoughts and to vicariously experience his or her feelings.

Three components

Historically, researchers have approached empathy from one of three perspectives: Some view empathy as a general ability or personality trait; others see empathy as a response to a particular situation or person; while a third group of researchers sees empathy as a process that people go through.

The first view of empathy as an ability or as a personality trait assumes that, as with all abilities, some people have more empathy than others. Under this approach, we could measure a person's level of empathy, give him or her an empathy score and rank the person relative to his or her peers.

The second view of empathy as a response to a situation assumes that the same person is likely to experience varying levels of empathy based on varying situations. Each person encounters different situations during the course of a day. Different situations are likely to resonate with different people, thereby giving rise to higher or lower levels of empathy accordingly. For example, Sarah works with Serena and Scott. When she arrived at work this morning, she noticed that Serena looked tired, her eyes were bloodshot and she barely made eye contact when Sarah greeted her. She is concerned about Serena and decides to ask her about it over lunch. In this situation, Sarah is displaying high empathy.

However, she was so concerned with Serena that she failed to notice how Scott looked very happy and upbeat this morning. There seemed to be a spring in his step, and his voice was loud and energetic. Scott is disappointed that

Lack of consideration damaged a 30-year relationship between the organization and a key employee.

Sarah walked right by his cubicle this morning because he proposed to his fiancée last night, she accepted and he is itching to tell someone. Clearly, in the second situation, Sarah is displaying low empathy.

Finally, the process approach suggests that each episode of empathy involves a number of stages wherein one person initially has the experience of relating to the feelings of another and communicates this feeling. In the third stage, the second person accepts the empathy and feels understood. In the example with Sarah, Serena and Scott, it is clear that Sarah is further along the empathic process with Serena than she is with Scott.

In its fullest form, empathy can be seen as a composite of these different views. In any one moment, a person's level of empathy is likely to be a combination of ability (some people are likely to have a natural ability to empathize with others), reaction to a situation (each person is likely to respond differently to different situations) and a process (wherein someone feels another's feelings, communicates that resonance to the other and finally, the other person is able to receive and accept this feeling of being understood).

Measuring empathy

There are two main ways to measure empathy: self-reports and observer ratings.

Self-reports ask people about their own levels of empathy. This involves giving people a questionnaire and having them rate themselves on a scale. Sample items might be "I accurately read the feelings of others" or "I appropriately respond to the needs of others." On a sample five-point scale, a one might mean it doesn't describe me at all, a three might mean it describes me somewhat, and a five might mean it describes me completely.

Self-report measures are relatively easy to administer, can tap into valuable information about another person and are a great way to develop self-awareness. A potential downside is that the target

may be tempted to respond in a socially desirable way, where people say what they think they "should" say over what they actually think.

Observer ratings involve asking other people about their observations of a target person's display of empathy. Sample items of observer ratings might be "accurately reads the feelings of others" or "appropriately responds to the needs of others." On a sample observer rating scale of one to five, a one might mean not at all characteristic, a three might mean somewhat characteristic, and a five might mean very characteristic. Observer ratings are harder to administer, and they rely on a certain level of skill in the observer to perceive and analyze another's behavior.

Another danger is that the target might ignore or discount the results. To avoid these issues and ensure more accurate ratings, it is best to have more than one person rate the target and develop a score based on the average of all observers. Again, observer ratings can be a valuable tool in raising a target's level of self-awareness.

Empathy at work

Empathy is an important skill to have when we are working with other people.

Consider the case of healthcare professionals. Psychologist Carl Rogers was one of the first researchers to write about the importance of empathy in the field of counseling and therapy. His studies showed that when clients experienced empathy from their therapists, they felt safe, and this created the ideal environment for behavior change and improvement.

The importance of empathy to the healthcare profession has subsequently been demonstrated by other researchers. For example, one piece of research found that doctors who scored higher on empathy used more open and reassuring patterns of communication with their patients, and another found that healthcare professionals with higher empathy provided better quality patient care.

Researchers also have looked at the

relevance of empathy to performance in fields beyond healthcare. One study found higher levels of empathy led to improved sales performance for automobile salesman. Another study in an oil refinery found that employees who scored higher in empathy were more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (that is, contribute to the organization in ways that went beyond their job descriptions and regular responsibilities).

A third study found that when job interviewees were better able to empathize with the interviewer (read the interviewer's reactions), they were better able to adjust their behavior accordingly, and this led to improved performance in the job interview.

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Empathy and leadership

Many authors have written about the importance of empathy for those in leadership positions. Two studies by Janet B. Kelleth, Ronald H. Humphrey and Randall G. Sleeth published in *The Leadership Quarterly* looked at leadership in student groups. Group members rated one another on displays of empathy and displays of leadership behaviors.

What these studies found was that group members who scored higher in empathy also achieved higher leadership impression scores. Their studies found that empathy was related to both task leadership (getting the job done) as well as relationship-oriented leadership (making sure people feel included and happy in the group).

A study conducted by the author, Todd J. Weber and William A. Gentry detailed in *The Leadership Quarterly* examined scores from a total of 6,731 managers working for diverse organizations in 38 countries. In our study, subordinates rated perceptions of their manager's empathy and the manager's boss rated him or her on work performance.

We found that empathy was positively related to job performance. That is, managers who received higher empathy scores from their subordinates received higher performance scores from their bosses.



Empathy and emotional intelligence

Empathy is a key component of emotional intelligence, a concept that has generated a great deal of attention over the past decade or so. Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and manage emotions in oneself, as well as the ability to recognize the emotions of others and to influence their behavior.

A number of authors and researchers have written about the importance of emotional intelligence to success in jobs that involve working with others. One of the most popular models of emotional intelligence is that of Daniel Goleman. Goleman's model consists of five skills: self-awareness (the ability to recognize one's internal states), self-regulation (the ability to manage one's internal states and impulses), motivation (having emotions that assist a person in reaching

his or her goals), empathy (awareness of other people's feelings and needs), and social skills (the ability to create desirable responses from others).

In his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman writes that empathy is the basic social skill upon which all other social skills are built. People with empathy are able to sense the feelings and perspectives of others and take an active interest in those things that are important to them. He writes that people with empathy are attentive to the emotional cues that others display, they listen well, show sensitivity, understand the way another person sees things, understand what others need and help out as a result of this understanding.

Developing empathy

The promising news about empathy is that, as with all skills (playing the

guitar, cooking, playing golf or speaking mandarin Chinese), it can be learned, and we improve our skills with effort and practice. The top two things we can do to develop our empathy skills are to develop greater curiosity about others and to practice active listening.

Developing greater curiosity. Most of us find it easier to experience empathy with people we can relate to in some way or with people for whom we feel a certain level of sympathy, but we may find it more difficult to empathize with those people whose interests appear to be in conflict with ours. If employees are not behaving in ways that a manager wants, it might be helpful to try to see the situation from their perspective and to understand why they are behaving in these seemingly dysfunctional ways.

When a customer is angry and appears to be overreacting, we may find it helpful

Empathy is a key component of emotional intelligence.

to listen closely to his concerns, try to see the situation from her perspective, let the person know that we understand and then try to solve the problem from that place of understanding and compassion. A highly empathic person is able to pick up on relevant informational cues and is apt to make appropriate comments that make others feel heard and understood, which, in turn, soothes and calms them.

So the first step in developing empathy is to start truly noticing other people. Managers can help encourage this quality in their employees by setting relevant goals, things like talk to one new person at work each week or learn something new about a person you already know. At the beginning of a team meeting, managers can ask everybody to say something about themselves that the others don't know.

For groups that have worked together for some time, a fun exercise is to ask people to write down three things about themselves, two of which are true and one of which is false. Once everyone has completed writing their notes, the group members go around and read their three statements out loud. The other members have to guess which statement is false. This works best when all three statements are realistic, making it harder for the other group members to guess the false statement.

Practice active listening. Active listening involves listening wholeheartedly to a message, without judgment, in an attempt to hear the totality of the communication. Carl R. Rogers and Richard E. Farson in *Communicating in Business Today* give three suggestions for active listening.

First, listen for total meaning. Each message comprises two components: the objective content (what is said) and the subjective feeling underlying the content (what is not said). Active listening involves paying attention to both components.

For example, in the scenario described at the beginning of this article, when John tells Joseph that he does not want Jack to attend the executive roundtable, there is an underlying feeling

of insecurity embedded within that message. Joseph could have explored this feeling component by saying something like: "I hear you saying you don't want Jack to attend the executive roundtable. Could you tell me a little more about why?"

Second, active listening involves acknowledging and responding to the feeling underlying the message. Again, Joseph could have said something like: "I am sensing some insecurity around Jack being at the meeting. Am I correct in my understanding? Let's talk about this a little more before we decide on what would be the best thing to do."

Third, active listening involves taking in all informational cues, both verbal and nonverbal. For example, it is important to notice things like any hesitation in the conversation, vocal inflection, pitch, loudness, softness, facial expressions, body posture, hand movements, eye movements, breathing and so on.

Rogers and Farson also note five things to avoid in active listening. First, don't try to change a person's way of seeing things. Active listening requires openness to the other person's point of view, however different it may be from one's own point of view. If we are trying to change the other person's mind, this alters the whole dynamic of the conversation. Now, instead of listening to the other person and truly hearing what he or she is saying, we are distracted by our own thoughts about what we will say next and are liable to miss half of the content of the message.

Second, don't respond quickly to demands for decisions, judgments and evaluations. Many times, the conversation puts us on the spot, and we are asked to give our opinion or form a decision right there and then. This makes it difficult to attend to the message being communicated because we are distracted by the pressure to form our own response. In such situations, it is best to reserve judgment and to ask the speaker for some time. An appropriate response might be: "That is an interesting question. I haven't considered it from that perspective before. Let me

think it over and get back to you once I've had some time to mull it over."

Third, don't pass judgment, critical or favorable. For most of us, forming an evaluation about what we just heard happens automatically. Pay attention the next time someone tells you about a piece of music they particularly like. Most likely, you will respond "I love that song" or "I don't listen to that style of music." We tend to form judgments, to agree or disagree with the speaker, and this one act changes the dynamic of the conversation from listener to evaluator. Even favorable information changes the dynamic and puts the listener in the position of power.

Four, don't give advice. As with evaluating, when we take on the role of advisor, our focus shifts to what we need to say to make sure that we don't mislead the other person. This gets in the way of our truly being able to attend to the message being communicated.

And five, avoid superficial statements of encouragement. Empathy requires that we truly understand the feelings of another, and sometimes these feelings may be difficult.

The final stage in the process of empathy (described above) is to ensure that the person feels heard and understood. Superficial statements of encouragement detract from this process and can actually give the other person the feeling of being overlooked and having his feelings being trivialized. A better practice is simply to listen to the person and to reflect back what you have just heard in your own words.

Psychologist Paul Ekman says we have six basic emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger and surprise. Empathy is the ability to recognize and respond to these emotions in others.

Research has shown that higher levels of empathy correspond to improved performance across a range of jobs, including healthcare, sales, management and leadership. Developing curiosity about a wider circle of people and practicing active listening are two key ways to develop our empathy skills and improve our workplace interactions. ❖

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