

EMPATHY: A CASE FOR SELFLESS LEADERSHIP

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Research supports the claim that there is a positive relationship between empathy and successful leadership. Empathy is attempting to understand the perspective of another by personalizing his or her narrative to oneself; in essence, it is “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.” Empathy is a highly effective leadership trait; it can enhance one’s leadership abilities and equip him or her with the resonance and respect he or she needs to succeed. Empathy is vital for successful leadership, although some in the business world might discount that skill. While some see sensitivity and empathy as unconventional or a sign of weakness in leaders, these traits allow one to better understand and serve their followers from a higher moral ground. Leaders who seek to develop and strongly exhibit empathy gain more trust from followers, and followers, in return, offer better results. Also, empathy is a central aspect of transformational leadership, which is popularly revered as the most effective and inspiring form of leadership. Empathetic leadership can motivate followers to work harder and with more enthusiasm and commitment toward the overall goal. It can reshape organizations, communities, and companies to cultivate a more positive, creative, and human environment.

INTRODUCTION - DEFINING EMPATHY

Empathy is a word often thrown around by psychologists, yoga instructors, and emotional intelligence gurus. It sounds like a neat concept, but what does it truly mean? Empathy and its sister-word sympathy are often used interchangeably without much thought or purpose; however, there is a defining difference between the two. *Merriam-Webster* (2019) clarifies that while sympathy means “sharing (or having the capacity to share) the feelings of another,” empathy embodies “imagining, or having the capacity to imagine, feelings that one does not have” (para. 3). Thus, empathy is characterized by not only “feeling sorry” for another but visualizing and internalizing another’s feelings and experiences.

Psychology researchers Decety and Jackson (2004) further supported this definition as they describe empathy as acknowledging and somewhat understanding another's emotions (p. 1). Thus, empathy is a mindful state of communication with those around us. It requires vulnerability from not only the sharer, but the listener; he or she must access his or her own emotions and experiences to effectively practice empathy. This effort and sacrifice of humility can increase trust and strengthen relationships.

The ability to practice empathy is built into our psychology. According to emotional intelligence researchers Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013), the part of the human brain called the amygdala allows one to read another's facial and body language to remain connected to the emotional responses of the other. Following those calculations, the prefrontal cortex then aids in crafting an appropriate response (p. 48). A healthy human brain also produces mirror neurons, which fire when we perceive emotion or action from another. These neurons allow us to imagine or "mirror" another's emotions or experiences. Mirror neurons are the reason we tend to cringe or squirm when watching a violent or painful scene in a movie or sometimes mirror another's tears. From that, one can argue that empathy is a part of human nature, and as other innate characteristics can be inhibited or amplified, effective empathy can be further exercised, learned, and developed.

EMPATHY IN LEADERSHIP

It is suggested that when leaders seek to exhibit empathy and positively influence follower's emotional states, follower performance can increase (Pescosolido, 2002, p. 595). When leaders exhibit empathy, they are able to be more socially aware of their followers and their follower's needs. "Social awareness—particularly empathy—is crucial for the leader's primal task of driving resonance" (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 49). Empathy allows leaders to be "in-tune" with their followers and enables them to be more democratic and perspective-seeking (p. 49). Perspective-seeking is a democratic approach, meaning leaders seek out and value their followers' perspectives in decision-making and problem-solving. This can make followers feel like understood and appreciated team members rather than task-robots.

In addition, empathy cultivates a mutual respect between leaders and followers. It helps maintain, create, and manage relationships among others. Three key elements of leadership are persuasion, conflict management, and collaboration. Many other major leadership tasks and roles depend on this interpersonal respect and emotional understanding (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 50). While empathy and emotion may not be the most culturally-stereotypical management traits, they are necessary to complete many leadership responsibilities.

Furthermore, Holt and Marques (2012), Chair and Dean of the Department of Management at Woodbury University, argued that empathy is “a critical leadership quality that has thus far encountered resistance in being accepted in both business education and business performance” (p. 97). In search for validation of this hypothesis, they surveyed 87 undergraduate business students enrolled in a higher-level class titled “Leadership Theory and Practice” (p. 97). In the first stage of the survey, they asked the students the question, “What qualities are essential to be an effective leader (on a scale of 1 [least important] to 10 [most important])?” After collecting the data, they found empathy to be ranked the lowest.

In a follow-up study, they explained the data results to a group of 35 MBA students and asked them, “Why do you think empathy was considered least important among the 10 leadership qualities presented?” After gathering the students’ responses, they found that most reasons given were either based on the belief that empathy in the workplace is “unethical” or that the respondents from the initial study lacked a proper understanding of empathy (Holt & Marques, 2012, p. 100). These results raise questions to current cultural and social understandings of empathy, ethics, and the business world. While many may see managerial and leadership positions conducting as “strictly business,” there is reason to argue that leaders are meant to inspire and that acknowledging the human factor, meaning the authentic, emotional core of individuals, is crucial if one hopes to succeed or impact others.

Further in the article, Holt and Marques (2012) examine major corporate leaders and CEOs. In these analyses, they observed a rather “thin line” between the characteristics of successful, inspiring, and known leaders

and “psychopaths.” It was noted that those who crossed unacceptable lines of ethics and had poor interpersonal interactions/reputations lacked a crucial characteristic that the revered leaders appeared to have: empathy (pp. 101-103). This could be due to the infamous leaders’ lack of effort or ability to try and understand their followers and their needs before making decisions.

Now, referring back to the inference made regarding empathy to be unethical; it appears that not only is empathetic leadership ethical, but a shared root of unethical leaders is the lack of empathy. When one lacks or is weak in his or her ability to empathize, relate, and consider the emotional and human state of those they interact with—and in a leader’s case, whom they oversee—it seems it could be easier to behave unethically and/or antisocially because only one’s own ego is considered (Holt and Marques, 2012). Thus, empathy can be a foundation of ethical and transformational leadership.

EMPATHETIC LEADERS’ EFFECT ON FOLLOWERS

Leaders’ symbols of success often lie in the performance and results of their followers; if they can leave a positive impact on their current or future followers, they can hope to make a lasting difference. One way a leader can accomplish this is through practicing transformational leadership. Transformational leadership, as illustrated through its name, aims to inspire and transform its organization and/or followers for the better in order to reach a higher goal. According to Gardner and Stough (2002), transformational leadership aims to increase the confidence of followers while cultivating a growth-centered environment that will push the organization forward and closer to its goals (as cited in Pinos, Twigg, Parayitam, & Olson, 2013, p. 63).

Consequentially, Bass (1995) stated that a vital characteristic of transformational leadership is empathy (as cited in Pinos et al., 2013, p. 67). Pinos et al. (2013) added, “Transformational leadership is based on the perception of subordinates, therefore the more that subordinates feel that the leader is a transformational type, the more that the leader’s vision is ingrained in followers” (p. 60). When followers perceive their leader(s) exhibiting confidence in and empathy toward them, they are then more likely to work toward and reach the organization’s goals and vision.

As aforementioned, empathetic leaders can have a positive effect on follower performance. According to Choi (2006), empathy can act as a catalyst to elevate followers in their work (as cited in Terrasi, 2015, p. 14). When followers feel supported in their efforts through personal understanding, belief, and empathy, they can be further motivated and accelerated toward their goals. Terrasi (2015) supported this theory, describing how empathetic leadership is shown to inspire increased efficiency, optimism, enthusiasm, commitment, confidence, productivity, resonance, and decreased frustration among followers (pp. 14-17). Even the potential of these results should not be overlooked, for if any group, company, or organization could cultivate an environment concentrated with any one of these outcomes, it could revolutionize its future. Thus, empathy can significantly strengthen both leaders and their followers.

One theory that supports and more clearly illustrates the reasoning behind empathy's effects is renowned author Stephen Covey's P/PC Balance theory. Covey (1989) explains that there is a direct correlation and need for balance between one's production (P) and production capability (PC); in other words, one's ability to work and to produce quality work is based on how well they are taken care of (p. 59). For example, let us say an employee is facing difficulties at home, and it is manifesting in their work. If the manager approaches them, sincerely tries to understand his or her problem, and attempts to work with them, that employee is more likely to succeed. If the manager does not first seek to understand and instead punishes or demeans the employee for his or her recent behavior, the employee's work and attitude will decrease in quality and willingness. It seems simple, but it is potentially revolutionary. Opening the door to vulnerability and human emotion in business and leadership positions can motivate followers and unite groups toward higher and unprecedented performance.

CONCLUSION - A PLACE FOR EMPATHY

The capacity for empathy is innately built inside of each of us as humans. It is the formal ability and practice of "putting yourself in someone else's shoes." It is more than sympathy and more than a simple "sorry." It is reaching inside yourself and summoning your life experiences, imagination, and emotions to connect with someone else. While at first

it may appear too personal or un-businesslike, it has the capacity for great achievements and successes, particularly for those in leadership positions. It can bolster them toward transformational leadership; it can envelop a leader with trust, intuition, resonance, creativity, democracy, ethicality, and respect; it can help them find innovative solutions and gain loyal, inspired followers. Followers' results and efforts can be vitally strengthened and motivated by leaders who seek to embody and promote empathy.

Empathy has the potential to redefine leadership and refurbish organizations—it's only a matter of effort and practice. As a research professor, Dr. Brené Brown (2015) summarizes it, "Empathy has no script. There is no right or wrong way to do it. It is simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting, and communicating that incredibly healing message of, 'You're not alone'" (p. 81). Now, there is room to argue that if one lives by this motto, whether in an official leadership position or not, they—by definition—are a true leader.

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