



Empathy – Building the Heart of the Leader

As leaders, with many responsibilities at work and in our personal lives, we often live “in our head” as we drive for daily and quarterly results and outcomes, yet when an organization is going through significant change, it is a critically important we balance the head with the heart, and shift regularly to the “heart” level, and practice several emotionally and socially intelligent competencies that will help us lead team members more effectively through significant levels of change.

One of those master competencies is **Empathy**. In this resource reading on Empathy, we will explore what Empathy means and how we can significantly increase our skills in it with a little practice---and take that journey from the leader’s head to the leader’s heart.

- The good news is that our brains and our collaborative social capacities are already “wired” for Empathy. Through centuries of human evolution, the capacity to care about others and collaborate with them has taken us out of the Ice Age forests into leadership roles in highly organized, collaborative business organizations like Partners Healthcare where we can contribute to the improvement of human health---because we care.
- You know this as front-line healthcare leaders. Simply put, human Empathy (and Compassion) are part of that something special that makes our clinical team members interact with our patients in a way that they experience that we care, which helps them know we care, and helps us thrive in our organization as we increase the amount of people we serve.

Let’s explore this master skill of emotional and social intelligence that is a foundation of high levels of social awareness and relationship management, and apply it to your role as a healthcare leader.

WHAT IS EMPATHY, ANYWAY?

Essentially, Empathy is the ability to be aware of, understand, and appreciate the feelings of others, including their needs, concerns, and issues. And there are a range of sub-competencies and sub-skills that make a person empathetic (see below).

Some of the hallmarks of an empathetic person is that you truly care about others, that you are generally kind towards others, and you show a sincere interest in their concerns. Being empathetic can often help shift potential conflict and an adversarial relationship into a relationship that is characterized by collaboration, communication and trust.

Maybe in your career, you've had the good fortune to work with some leaders who have been naturally empathic. Studies of effective leaders show they often use these kinds of empathic patterns:

- Balance a focus on building relationships and caring about others, with getting the tasks done!
- Balance setting the vision and holding people to high standards, but also taking an active role in developing and coaching people
- Show care about a team or group, and create a feeling of resonance and purpose in that group to align and motivate them to tackle a challenge
- Incorporate the perspectives and feelings of others into making decisions and taking actions
- Listen empathically to others to understand their feelings, not just their perspectives or positions
- Observe and attend to the feelings and “moods” of a team and group, and makes sure the group accesses positive emotions or moods vs. allowing negative moods to create pessimism.
- Facilitate shared norms and values in their teams that clarify the desired behaviors in the team that helps them build team trust, communication and collaboration
- Show organizational-level Empathy and take a strong “systems perspective” that cares about the perspectives and needs of other groups / functions, which mitigates tendencies towards “silo” behavior and “us” vs. “them” mind-sets, and more...

WHAT EMPATHY IS NOT

As leaders, it's important not to confuse Empathy with other human capacities. Let's clear up a three misconceptions about Empathy.

- First of all, Empathy is not being “nice”, and exchanging pleasant and polite statements with another person. Empathy has a depth to it that **focuses on another person**---not just surface-level interactions.
- Empathy is not sympathy, where you as the speaker may put into your own words your reactions and feelings about another person's situation, as in, “I am sorry you are dealing with a rough situation now.” Empathy focuses more on understanding the other person, and their feelings and thoughts, as in, “I hear that you are feeling really angry about this situation right now.”
- Empathy is not necessarily agreeing with or approving of another's viewpoint or position. Empathy seeks to **understand** another person's needs and concerns, and certainly acknowledges that these viewpoints or needs exist, but Empathy does not necessarily mean we are agreeing with, or validating, these needs in a way that requires us to respond in agreement---when we actually don't agree.

BUILDING SKILLS FOR EMPATHY

In the Leader's Retreat, we conveyed that the source of "whole person" change begins from the inside-out, and with this master skill of emotional and social intelligence, you can build habits and skills for Empathy just like you can build healthy habits for exercise and nutrition. You practice some "small changes", and pretty soon, you'll have some "big results".

- Let's unpack Empathy now. Let's start with three basic foundations we can use to build Empathy, then learn about the seven inter-related sub-competencies for Empathy.

Did you know you are biologically wired for Empathy? Or that your skills for Empathy can be accelerated by adopting just two basic mind-sets that you may already believe to be true? Let's look at our physiology first, then the two mind-sets.

Foundation One: Getting In Sync with the Social Brain

- Numerous research studies suggest we have a brain and a physiology that is particularly wired to be social. Your "social brain" is carried on a stream of what neuroscientists are calling mirror neurons. These multiple neural pathways (our neural "Wi-Fi" so to speak) allow you to mimic and pick up not just actions, but tune into people's emotions and intentions viscerally---and "get in snyc"---in a sort of open reciprocal "loop" as these mirror neurons activate inside you.
- In other words, when you practice Empathy, people can **feel it**. And conversely, when you practice pessimism, people can feel it too. If you are a team leader, your entire team can get carried on a stream of mirror neurons of pessimism if you are having a "bad hair day", so watch what you are broadcasting on your social Wi-Fi network!

Foundation Two: Just Like Me

- Another foundation for Empathy is a "mind-set" recognition that other people are just like you; they generally want the same important things from their life and work, and just like you, they just want to be effective, happy and successful too. When you realize this fundamental unity and similarity with others, and you adopt this foundational mind-set, Empathy then naturally arises. "Hey, this person is basically just like me. I can identify and empathize with them."

Foundation Three: Cultivating Kindness

- Another foundational "mind-set" to develop Empathy (and a related high performing capacity of the leader's heart, Compassion) is to adopt a habit of generally wishing people to be well and happy. This leads you to naturally develop a capacity for human kindness. When you truly wish people to be well and happy and successful---a lot---you become a kind person.
- And you shift away from Ego that is overly concerned with the small ego self, self-survival and self-ambition, even at the expense of others. When you are kind person, people want to be around you because they know you care about them and wish them well. Intentionally developing your capacity for kindness is a natural accelerator of interpersonal Empathy. In some respects, it is both a "mind-set" and a "heart re-set" in practice.

- To support you in developing a mind-set to connect you to the fundamental unity and similarity between you and others, and to develop more Kindness and Empathy, then try these Empathy accelerator exercises called “**Just Like Me**” & “**Sending Kindness**”.
- Download the exercises [“Just Like Me”](#) & [“Sending Kindness”](#)

EMPATHY AND ITS COMPONENT COMPETENCIES

Let’s look at the seven inter-related emotional and social intelligence skills to build our capacity for Empathy.

1. *Recognizing Emotions*

- The key doorway into interpersonal Empathy is the ability to recognize emotions. What is amazing about the capacity to recognize human emotions is that, despite significant cultural or even vast global geographical differences between people, we humans can all universally recognize that when we see someone **smile**, this means that person is pleased or happy; or when we see a **scowl**, this facial expression may mean that person could be angry, frustrated, or disgusted.
- This “universality” of human emotions allows us to read facial expressions and attune to other people and their inner states, which gives us key data to begin to understand and empathize with their concerns and wherever possible, meet their needs.
- The competency of recognizing emotions can be consciously learned. In fact, professionals involved in police detective work and criminal interrogations are highly trained to recognize emotions, even passing and fleeting micro facial expressions, eye movements and body language for key bits of information on what people are actually feeling and thinking, even if their words are different. In like manner, when we attune to and observe another person more mindfully, we can recognize emotions that will help us understand them, work with them better, and even influence them more effectively.

2. *Primal Empathy*

- This type of Empathy has a strong brain / biology component. Our social brain, our neural Wi-Fi, can pick up, attune to and “**feel with**” what others may be feeling, including sensing their non-verbal emotional signals.

3. *Cognitive Empathy*

- This type of Empathy is the ability to **listen** to and **understand** another person’s perspective. It does not mean that you necessarily agree with the other person’s perspective, but you cognitively understand the other person’s perspective and concerns (even if you disagree).

4. *Emotional Empathy*

- This type of Empathy is the ability to be socially aware of, perceive and attune to another person’s feelings, needs and concerns, the so-called ability to “walk in another shoe’s”. In general terms, when think of Empathy as a skill, this is the type of Empathy we mean. To be strong in Emotional Empathy means you care about another’s feelings; you are sensitive to, relate to and respect the feelings of others; and you try to avoid hurting the feelings of others. And wherever possible, and if it is appropriate, you try to address their needs and concerns.

- Emotional Empathy is also the doorway into the ability to perceive the feelings or moods of a team or group, and the relationship dynamics in a group, otherwise known as the ability for **Social Cognition**. This is a very useful skill for managers and team leaders as emotions in a group can be highly contagious, either on the positive side, or the negative side (that neural Wi-Fi again!).
- Empathy and Social Cognition then are foundational skills, and correlate highly to the role of a leader motivating people and teams, and engaging people in positive change. Empathy and Social Cognition also help leaders diagnose and find ways to interrupt patterns in a group or team that has become pessimistic or disaffected.
- Emotional Empathy is also the doorway to access the organizational-level Empathy-based skill known as **Political Awareness**, the ability to read an organization's emotional currents and power relationships.

5. *Empathic Accuracy*

- This Empathy skill is the ability to **accurately understand** another person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions. It's the almost uncanny ability to accurately "read people" although it is happening at multiple levels at the same time: cognitively / intuitively, emotionally, and physically. An example of this occurs in close relationships like marriages, where some couples know each other so well and can "read" each other so well, they may be able to accurately finish sentences for each other!

6. *Attunement*

- Attunement is a social awareness skill that is central to being an empathic leader. At the interpersonal level, it can simply mean the ability to **listen with full receptivity** to another person, attune to their moods, concerns and needs in an emotionally synchronous way. Attunement is a hugely important skill for Empathic Listening, a type of deeper interpersonal listening that is one of the key skills of leaders who are considered "empathic".

7. *Political Awareness*

- Political Awareness is skill that uses a capacity for Empathy as a key input. The skill of Political Awareness means you can read the feelings, needs and concerns not only of individuals, but also, how the emotional currents and relationships between groups of individuals interact to create the emotional fabric of the organization.
- Included in this skill is the ability to empathize and read how the power relationships operate, and how decision-making, resources, and power are dynamically influenced and allocated at the organizational level. Some leaders are very good at this useful skill; and some may not be as aware of these social, emotional and power dynamics at the organizational level.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS & TEAMS WITH EMPATHY & TRUST

As leaders, Empathy is key for teamwork and employee engagement too. You can use Empathy to build strong relationships with build your clinical care teams. As you may have experienced many times in your career, when you care about others and you practice Empathy with another person, it builds trust. And trust is essential to building a high performing team, or building relationships with another person.

- One excellent practice area is to build better “coaching and mentoring relationships” with people like your direct reports or other team members who you supervise.
- In a coaching / mentoring relationship, the most important first step is establishing trust. You have to create the relationship conditions that the mentee will want to open up to you because he senses you care. The more he opens up to you, the more effective you can be working with him. As you continue to work with him, and he senses your increasing Empathy and care for him, this helps him to trust you more, which in turn helps him to open up to you more. So a positive loop of Empathy and trust can create a strong coaching & mentoring relationship.
- In a team environment where you are the team leader, a positive loop of Empathy and trust can be established in similar ways. The team needs to focus their energies on the team’s common goals and processes they are using to achieve their goals, and not be overly concerned about protecting and defending their “egos” or trying to look good and practice “impression management” in front of their teammates, or you, the team leader.

And so, building trust can be accelerated in the team by:

- **Empathy:** explicitly caring about each other and understanding we all want to be successful too, but anyone one of us is not going to be “perfect” all of the time.
- **Open and honest communication:** we are open, practice “straight talk”, and share what we are aware of, and what we need; versus dysfunctional communications patterns like gossiping, withholding, blaming, not telling the truth, and more...
- **Support:** we all need to support each other. Offer support or ask for support if we need it, and not be concerned we may look “weak” or “incapable” if we ask for support now and then. In high performing teams and relationships, give-and-take levels of interpersonal support are expected!
- **Trust:** give team members the benefit of the doubt and assume positive intent that they mean well and want to do the right thing, even if it does not make sense to us at the time; and assume that others are trustworthy and treat them that way. If you want more trust to operate in the team, initiate it by holding other team members as trustworthy. Trust begets trust.

EMPATHY IN HIGH DEMAND WORK ENVIRONMENTS

In high demand work environments, a common pattern we see is that leaders have many tasks to get done, and sometimes they become so task focused and end results-driven that they often lose a balanced focus on building key relationships, and empathically paying attention to the needs of others, like their direct reports or key peers who they need to support better or differently.

- Yet, it is often those closest to us that help us get all the tasks and work done that we need to focus on the most. If this pattern can be true for you at times, remember much of it could be driven by the work environment / work load, and your role.
- Nonetheless, it is through our people that we “make it happen”, so Empathy and caring for others is a powerful and supportive practice that is very integral and essential in our drive for the results. And caring for others is at the very heart of a healthcare organization’s mission, a mission we are being called to reflect everyday as a clinical care leader.
- Is Empathy a growth area for you? If so, small changes can bring big results! Start practicing, and remember, you already come “pre-wired” to be an empathic leader!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

- Bradberry, Travis and Jean Greaves. *The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.
- Freedman, Joshua. *The Heart of Leadership*. San Mateo: Six Seconds, 2007.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1998.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Primal Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.
- Goleman, Daniel. *The Focused Leader*. Boston. Harvard Business Review, December 2013
- Pert, Candace. *The Molecules of Emotion*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- Stein, Steven and Howard Book. *The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*. Ontario: Jossey Bass, 2011.
- The Arbinger Institute. *Leadership and Self-Deception*. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002.