What Makes a Leader

By Daniel Goleman

*Note: this reading is a continuation from the What Makes a Leader article you read in Unit 1. This section focuses only on the empathy side. For a refresher on the entire article, click **here**.*

Empathy

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people. it is having a skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions. The hallmarks of empathy include: expertise in building and retaining talent, cross-cultural sensitivity, and service to clients and customers.

Of all the dimensions of emotional intelligence, empathy is the most easily recognized. We have all felt the empathy of a sensitive teacher or friend; we have all been struck by its absence in an unfeeling coach or boss. But when it comes to business, we rarely hear people praised, let alone rewarded, for their empathy. The very word seems unbusinesslike, out of place amid the tough realities of the marketplace.

But empathy doesn't mean a kind of "I'm OK, you're OK" mushiness. For a leader, that is, it doesn't mean adopting other people's emotions as one's own and trying to please everybody. That would be a nightmare—it would make action impossible. Rather, empathy means thoughtfully considering employees' feelings—along with other factors—in the process of making intelligent decisions.

For an example of empathy in action, consider what happened when two giant brokerage companies merged, creating redundant jobs in all their divisions. One division manager called his people together and gave a gloomy speech that emphasized the number of people who would soon be fired. The manager of another division gave his people a different kind of speech. He was up-front about his own worry and confusion, and he promised to keep people informed and to treat everyone fairly.

The difference between these two managers was empathy. The first manager was too worried about his own fate to consider the feelings of his anxiety-stricken colleagues. The second knew

intuitively what his people were feeling, and he acknowledged their fears with his words. Is it any surprise that the first manager saw his division sink as many demoralized people, especially the most talented, departed? By contrast, the second manager continued to be a strong leader, his best people stayed, and his division remained as productive as ever.

Empathy is particularly important today as a component of leadership for at least three reasons: the increasing use of teams; the rapid pace of globalization; and the growing need to retain talent.

Consider the challenge of leading a team. As anyone who has ever been a part of one can attest, teams are cauldrons of bubbling emotions. They are often charged with reaching a consensus—which is hard enough with two people and much more difficult as the numbers increase. Even in groups with as few as four or five members, alliances form and clashing agendas get set. A team's leader must be able to sense and understand the viewpoints of everyone around the table.

That's exactly what a marketing manager at a large information technology company was able to do when she was appointed to lead a troubled team. The group was in turmoil, overloaded by work and missing deadlines. Tensions were high among the members. Tinkering with procedures was not enough to bring the group together and make it an effective part of the company.

So the manager took several steps. In a series of one-on-one sessions, she took the time to listen to everyone in the group—what was frustrating them, how they rated their colleagues, whether they felt they had been ignored. And then she directed the team in a way that brought it together: She encouraged people to speak more openly about their frustrations, and she helped people raise constructive complaints during meetings. In short, her empathy allowed her to understand her team's emotional makeup. The result was not just heightened collaboration among members but also added business, as the team was called on for help by a wider range of internal clients.

Globalization is another reason for the rising importance of empathy for business leaders. Cross-cultural dialogue can easily lead to miscues and misunderstandings. Empathy is an

antidote. People who have it are attuned to subtleties in body language; they can hear the message beneath the words being spoken. Beyond that, they have a deep understanding of both the existence and the importance of cultural and ethnic differences.

Consider the case of an American consultant whose team had just pitched a project to a potential Japanese client. In its dealings with Americans, the team was accustomed to being bombarded with questions after such a proposal, but this time it was greeted with a long silence. Other members of the team, taking the silence as disapproval, were ready to pack and leave. The lead consultant gestured them to stop. Although he was not particularly familiar with Japanese culture, he read the client's face and posture and sensed not rejection but interest—even deep consideration. He was right: When the client finally spoke, it was to give the consulting firm the job.

Finally, empathy plays a key role in the retention of talent, particularly in today's information economy. Leaders have always needed empathy to develop and keep good people, but today the stakes are higher. When good people leave, they take the company's knowledge with them.

That's where coaching and mentoring come in. It has repeatedly been shown that coaching and mentoring pay off not just in better performance but also in increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover. But what makes coaching and mentoring work best is the nature of the relationship. Outstanding coaches and mentors get inside the heads of the people they are helping. They sense how to give effective feedback. They know when to push for better performance and when to hold back. In the way they motivate their protégés, they demonstrate empathy in action.

In what is probably sounding like a refrain, let me repeat that empathy doesn't get much respect in business. People wonder how leaders can make hard decisions if they are "feeling" for all the people who will be affected. But leaders with empathy do more than sympathize with people around them: They use their knowledge to improve their companies in subtle but important ways.

Three Kinds of Empathy

Note: this reading, also by Daniel Goleman, is gotten from his website here and flows nicely with the previous reading.

Being cool in crisis seems essential for our being able to think clearly. But what if keeping cool makes you too cold to care? In other words, must we sacrifice empathy to stay calm? That's the dilemma facing those who are preparing top teams to handle the next Katrina-like catastrophe we might face. Which gets me to Paul Ekman, a world expert on emotions and our ability to read and respond to them in others. Paul and I had a long conversation recently, in which he described three very different ways to sense another person's feelings.

The first is "cognitive empathy," simply knowing how the other person feels and what they might be thinking. Sometimes called perspective-taking, this kind of empathy can help in, say, a negotiation or in motivating people. A study at the University of Birmingham found, for example, that managers who are good at perspective-taking were able to move workers to give their best efforts.

But there can be a dark side to this sort of empathy – in fact, those who fall within the "Dark Triad" – narcissists, Machiavellians, and sociopaths (see Chapter 8 in *Social Intelligence*) – can be talented in this regard, while having no sympathy whatever for their victims. As Paul told me, a torturer needs this ability, if only to better calibrate his cruelty – and talented political operatives no doubt have this ability in abundance.

Katrina's devastation, we all saw, was amplified enormously by the lackadaisical response from the very agencies that were supposed to manage the emergency. As we all witnessed, leaders at the highest levels were weirdly detached, despite the abundant evidence on our TV screens that the disaster's victims were doubly victimized by the indifference to their suffering.

Certainly empathy qualifies as one critical measure of the right leader in a crisis, along with being cool under pressure. But exactly what kind of empathy should we look for? When it comes to the right leader for a crisis, cognitive empathy alone seems insufficient . Then, Paul told me, there's "emotional empathy," – when you feel physically along with the other person, as though their emotions were contagious. This emotional contagion, social neuroscience tells us, depends in large part on the mirror neuron system (see Chapter Three in *Social Intelligence*). Emotional

empathy makes someone well-attuned to another person's inner emotional world, a plus in any of a wide range of callings, from sales to nursing – let alone for any parent or lover.

One downside of emotional empathy occurs when people lack the ability to manage their own distressing emotions can be seen in the psychological exhaustion that leads to burnout. The purposeful detachment cultivated by those in medicine offers one way to inoculate against burnout. But the danger arises when detachment leads to indifference, rather than to well-calibrated caring.

Finally, there's what Paul calls "compassionate empathy," which I've written about using the term "empathic concern" (see Chapter Six in *Social Intelligence*). With this kind of empathy we not only understand a person's predicament and feel with them, but are spontaneously moved to help, if needed.

Paul told me about his daughter, who works as a social worker in a large city hospital. In her situation, he said, she can't afford to let emotional empathy overwhelm her. "My daughter's clients don't want her to cry when they're crying," as he put it. "They want her to help them figure out what to do now – how to arrange a funeral, how to deal with the loss of a child." Empathic concern was the vital ingredient missing in the top-level response to Hurricane Katrina.

References

- Goleman, D., 2007. Three Kinds of Empathy: Cognitive, Emotional, Compassionate. Daniel Goleman. Available at: http://www.danielgoleman.info/three-kinds-of-empathy-cognitive-emotional-compassionate/ [Accessed November 19, 2017].
- Goleman, D. & Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, 2017. What Makes a Leader? Harvard Business Review. Available at: https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader [Accessed November 19, 2017].