

## **Managing With Empathy: Can You Feel What I Feel?**

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*Empathy is the ability “to sense the other’s private world as if it were your own but never losing the ‘as if’ quality” (Rogers, 1957). We suggest that this ability has been overlooked as a potentially useful construct for management. We review the literature to provide a conceptual definition of empathy and to develop an understanding of the effect empathy might have on managerial practice. We develop a framework for the application of empathy to management, suggesting methods to develop the empathic abilities of managers in ways that will produce positive organization outcomes. Implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a hospital, it is expected that nurses and doctors will care for their patients and be empathic to the pain the patient is experiencing. The medical field focuses on empathy training while still in medical school and during clinical education due to the nature of the work. Nurses and doctors are working with patients going through great distress and these patients want help from somebody who they perceive to have their best interests in mind and who cares about them as a person.

Care and concern for human beings should be present in any profession where people are a factor – including managing employees in a business setting. In order to effectively manage employees it is important to remember that employees are complex individuals with several factors affecting their life. Managers need to be able to relate to employees and sense what is going on in the employees’ world and the emotions employees are experiencing without getting bound up in those emotions; in other words, to empathize with employees (Rogers, 1957). A manager’s job is to put together the “big picture” view of the employee being managed, while still maintaining the objectivity and keeping everything in context. To do so, managers need to develop and display empathy in the workplace.

Perhaps one of the best examples of managing with empathy was President Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln “possessed extraordinary empathy – the gift or curse of putting himself in the place of another, to experience what they were feeling, to understand their motives and desires” (Goodwin, 2005). Lincoln’s innate ability to detach himself from his own emotions and view situations objectively proved useful as he was able to settle conflicts within his cabinet and provide effective leadership despite cabinet

members' contention with one another and President Lincoln. According to his close friends it was his "crowning gift" and "gave him the power to forecast with uncanny accuracy what his opponents were likely to do" (Goodwin, 2005). While not everybody is naturally empathic, empathy is a skill that can be learned and provide managers an important foundation for connecting to employees.

Empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible (Hoffman, 2000). It can be argued that the basis for all human interaction is empathy – the ability to understand what the other person is experiencing. To date, however, there has been relatively little writing, theoretical development, or empirical research on empathy as a managerial construct. While there is material available on empathy in domains such as health care (e.g., Irving & Dickson, 2004; Northouse & Northouse, 1992), human services (Hojat, 2009) and counseling (Clark, 2010; Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Trusty, Ng, & Watts, 2005), there is a paucity of substantive work integrating the issue of empathy in the practice of management.

Our purpose in this paper is to examine the construct of empathy within the managerial sphere of activity. We first examine the construct of empathy and the current research on the effects of empathy in organizational and interpersonal relationships. We suggest that the ability to empathize is something that is a central part of effective management when it comes to dealing with, retaining and developing employees. For this reason, empathy training should be incorporated into management development.

## **WHAT IS EMPATHY?**

Empathy is often a misconstrued and misunderstood construct (Book, 1988), frequently mistaken for similar constructs such as sympathy, kindness, or approval. While empathy has often been thought of as "feeling what the other person is feeling," current research suggests that this is but one aspect of the empathy construct. Rogers' (1957) early definition of empathy is the ability "to sense the other's private world as if it were your own but never losing the 'as if' quality" (p. 210). In this regard, empathy is seen as a complex intrapsychic and interpersonal process (Bennett, 1995).

Hojat (2009) defined empathy as "a predominantly cognitive (rather than emotional) attribute that involves an understanding (rather than feeling) of experiences, concerns, and perspectives of [another person], combined with the capacity to communicate this understanding" (p. 413). Empathy is an awareness of all things outside of the self and the ability to predict outcomes based on that awareness. Empathy is a complex variable and may be seen as an ability, communication style, trait, response, skill, process, or experience (Wheeler & Barrett, 1994). The common thread is that empathy is both cognition and action. While awareness and understanding are part of empathizing, there is also an active interpersonal relationship that is implied, as in the often-heard empathy mantra "to put yourself in someone else's shoes".

Indeed, later work by Rogers (1975) and Nelson-Jones (1983) further refined the definition of empathy. In the revised definition, empathy has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. The cognitive component focuses on understanding the other person's world; the affective component concerns feeling what the other person is feeling; and the behavioral component is the ability to communicate this understanding and feeling to the other person.

A review of the empathy literature by Gladstein (1983) notes that different researchers and theorists tend to emphasize different aspects of this revised definition of empathy. Gladstein (1983) emphasized the cognitive aspect of empathy, defined as intellectually taking the role or perspective of another person, and differentiated this from the affective dimension of empathy, defined as responding with the same emotion to another person's emotion. Research appears to suggest that many prefer to utilize two distinct dimensions of empathy (Irving & Dickson, 2004). However, later work explicitly incorporated the behavioral component of empathy as essential for effective relationships, particularly through the application of communication skills (Egan, 1998; Hackney, 1978; Ivey & Authier, 1978).

Empathy has also been defined in terms of three constructs – empathetic responsiveness, perspective taking and sympathetic responsiveness (Weaver & Kirtley, 1995). Empathetic responsiveness occurs when one person experiences an emotional response parallel to another person's actual or anticipated

display of emotions. Perspective taking is the most widely agreed upon empathy construct and is simply a process that broadly involves imagining oneself in the place of another. Sympathetic responsiveness comprises feelings of sorrow, compassion, or concern for others, resulting from consideration of their plight.

What is apparent from these conceptual definitions is that empathy has both a cognitive/affective (intrapsychic) component and a behavioral (interpersonal) component (Rogers, 1957). It is the ability to both understand and feel what the other person is feeling and to communicate an empathic response that might be useful for managers in organizations. A manager who can comprehend the feelings and emotions of subordinates, and can communicate that understanding to the subordinate, may be more effective in providing direction and motivation to employees.

While some have suggested that empathy is a component of emotional intelligence (e.g., Salovey et al., 2001; Goleman, 1995; Law et al., 2004; Mayer et al., 1999), it is apparent from this review that empathy is a distinct construct. Emotional intelligence focuses almost exclusively on perceiving, using, understanding, and managing individuals' emotions and feelings (Salovey et al., 2001; Goleman, 1995). However, empathy involves more than individuals' emotions; empathy includes the cognitive understanding of the individuals' situation as well as the emotions that are present (Gladstein, 1983; Rogers, 1975).

## **RESEARCH ON EMPATHY**

Psychological studies have shown that humans start developing empathy during their formative years. Hoffman (2000) has proposed a theoretical framework for the development of empathy with a focus on empathic distress – empathy's contribution to the principles of caring and justice. There are five stages of development that humans experience: reactive newborn cry, where babies cry when others cry; egocentric empathic distress, when children respond to another's distress as though they are the ones in distress, suggesting a lack of clear distinction between self and others; quasi-egocentric empathic distress, when children realize the distress is the other person's and not their own, but confuse what the other is feeling with their own feelings and try to help by doing for the other what they would want for comfort themselves; veridical empathic distress, in which children come closer to feeling what the other is actually feeling because they now realize that the other has inner states that are independent from their own; and empathy for another's experience beyond the immediate situation, where children realize that others have lives that can generally be sad or happy, and a subcategory of this stage when children can empathize with an entire group. Research has supported various aspects of this model (e.g., Hoffman, 2000; Hoffman, 1981; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976).

By adulthood people have generally developed the cognitive ability to determine the correct and appropriate action (Hoffman, 1981). Thus the research suggests that empathy is a natural tendency for humans that can be developed into an ability to respond appropriately to many different situations. Additional research supports this view of empathy as a developmental process (e.g., Bowman & Reeves, 1987; Ford, 1979; Piaget, 1965; Selman, 1980), including research that identifies the underlying neuropsychological basis for empathy (Grattan, Bloomer, Archambault, & Eslonger, 1994).

Research has demonstrated that empathy can be measured. Robert Hogan (1969) developed the Hogan Empathy Scale (HES) to measure the skill level a person had in regards to empathy and selected five universal behaviors that characterize empathic people, that are also important qualities to possess in order to be an effective manager: being socially perceptive of a wide range of personal cues; being aware of the impression made on others; being skilled in social techniques of imaginative play, pretending, and humor; having insight into one's own motives and behavior; and possessing the ability to evaluate the motivation of others in interpreting situations. Being socially perceptive of a wide range of social cues, as well as the ability to evaluate the motivation of others in interpreting situations, is an important management skill because managers need to be fully aware of all facets of a situation and any perceptions and motivations involved, so the manager can make the best possible decision or provide appropriate feedback.

Additional research measuring empathy has identified four measurable dimensions of empathy- Perspective Taking, Empathetic Concern, Empathetic Matching, and Personal Distress – taken together these comprise the Multidimensional Empathy Scale (MES) (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005). This scale was shown to have good psychometric properties, with good internal reliability and construct validity. Others have developed similar scales using other instruments and questionnaire items (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2005; Davis, 1980, 1996; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010; Marandi, Little, & Sekhon, 2006; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). We therefore conclude that empathy can be a useful construct in the organizational sciences.

Indeed, extant research indicates that empathy among leaders in organization can affect leader-member exchange quality (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010) and such organizational outcomes as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005). This has led some to suggest that empathy may be essential for effective organizational leadership (Stefano & Wasylyshyn, 2005). Empathy has also been shown to influence ethical decision-making in managers (Mend & May, 2009). Additional empirical work has shown empathy to affect customer loyalty (Marandi, Little, & Sekhon, 2006), relationship outcomes in the sales function (Aggarwal et. al., 2005), and positive patient outcomes in health and human service organizations (Hojat, 2009). These findings suggest that there are broader organizational outcomes that can be positively influenced by the development of empathy among members of the organization, further supporting our contention that empathy is an important construct for the practice of management.

## **EMPATHY IN MANAGEMENT**

In management, perspective taking is the construct of empathy that may be the most relevant. Managers should be able to view a situation in terms of how employees might be viewing the situation, but without getting so emotionally invested in the outcome that managers lose their objectivity. Objectivity is key as it applies to management and empathy. In order to effectively manage it is necessary to look at everything equitably – not necessarily all equal but giving each situation the time and consideration deserved. Empathy in management is not necessarily feelings-based. It is about viewing a situation from an angle different than what is usual or natural for the manager. An empathic manager should be stressing perception and cognition in defining their level of empathy with “objectivity, detachment and analytic knowledge of the other person’s social roles as its critical dimensions” (Keefe, 1976: 10).

Managers need to critically analyze the factors influencing the employee’s reaction without getting too emotionally invested in what the employee is experiencing or losing sight of the big picture and impeding the managers’ own well being. President Lincoln’s great inclination for empathy also came with a downfall as he could go through great periods of depression from the very real feeling of pain he could experience when empathizing with others (Goodwin, 2005). While empathy may be a valuable personal strength and asset to possess as a manager, it is important to balance empathy with the requirement to produce organizational results and the manager’s own well-being. (It has been noted by Black and Weinrich (2003) that empathy is a major component in compassion fatigue or burnout among those in the helping professions, and there is therefore the possibility that the same issues might affect a highly empathic manager.)

For a manager to be a proficient empathizer, he or she must be able to take the role of another accurately, and be able to correctly predict the impact that various lines of action will have on the other’s definition of the situation (Jessor & Richardson, 1968). Management training is very focused on “big picture” thinking and seeing how all parts of a corporation can fit together. This concept can sometimes lead to managers viewing employees as just another “piece” to fit into the “puzzle,” and forgetting to focus on the individual employee as a “puzzle” of his or her own. From a decision-making and implementation standpoint, it is important to be able to anticipate employee reactions. Without having an established rapport with employees, it is difficult to determine how a new idea will be received. Empathy can help establish an initial relationship with the employee and give a better understanding of what the

employee is like, as well as his/her general reactions, emotions and how s/he learns and processes information. This is especially important in management because people who are shown care and empathy will work more effectively for the people who show them care. Caring about others does not mean getting “soft” as a manager, rather it means showing reasonable concern and support for employees in every way possible to help them perform and grow (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996).

Empathy breeds affiliation within a company. A manager’s empathic behavior stimulates employees’ need for affiliation by generating trust in and identification with the manager, stimulating emotional attachment with the manager and emphasizing cooperative relationships among the followers (Choi, 2006). People have a natural need to form personal relationships with others and when this can be accomplished at work it helps to generate trust and lead the employee to desire to prolong their relationship with the company. Trusting relationships are important when it comes to employee retention. Employees with this high need for affiliation that is enhanced by their manager perceive a very strong collective identity and show organizational citizenship behavior towards the manager and co-workers. These behaviors help build a highly cohesive and effective team (Choi, 2006). Empathic managers help to create identification and strong bonds with employees that help to define the boundary of the group and put strong emphasis on team spirit. Group identification helps to establish cohesiveness and increase the degree of loyalty to the group and intention to remain with that group (Lott & Lott, 1965). In this cohesive type of environment, empathic behaviors also tend to filter down because if managers at one echelon demonstrate a particular leadership style, similar qualities are likely to be seen at lower echelons (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999).

An important aspect of the manager’s job is to develop talent and put employees in a better situation to succeed. Effective managers know more about employees than just the work they do, including the employees’ current situation, dreams, preferences, and wishes so that long-term, managers can give critical feedback to help employees grow and achieve (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996). Coaching employees is beneficial to the managers because managing the whole person will often be rewarded with better performance and a better feeling for the manager (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996).

Empathy can also be characterized as being skilled in the social techniques of imaginative play, pretending, and humor (Hogan, 1969). Getting employee support for new ideas and decisions is much easier for an empathic and well-liked manager than for a manager who sits behind a closed door all day. One of the best ways for the manager to be endearing is by telling humanizing anecdotes and stories. For example, President Lincoln was well known for being an animated storyteller and could captivate audiences of all sizes; whenever he heard a new story he would practice how he wanted to tell it in a way to best entertain his crowd (Goodwin, 2005).

While storytelling in management should not be overused, it is a good management practice to regularly have one-on-one conversations with employees where personal sharing is encouraged. Caring is knowing and getting to know at least three non-work things about everyone such as hobbies, interests, or family details is beneficial so there is something to talk about besides just the work performed; this can make employees feel valued as individuals. (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2004)

Managers need to be aware of their own motives and be aware of the impression they are making. Many attempts at empathy fail due to a lack of awareness of the image actually being portrayed. One of the least empathic behaviors, as determined by Hogan’s (1969) research in developing the HES, is not varying roles and relating to everybody in the same way. Managers can fall into the trap of having their own “unique management style.” How they behave is “just the way they are.” However, every employee is an individual and needs to be treated as such. Each employee will react and handle certain situations and events in a different way. By not varying management styles between employees, the manager is doing a disservice to all involved and not being effective in the management role.

Being able to perform tasks and meet goals does not necessarily mean the manager is operating as effectively or empathically as possible. Inherent in the title of manager is directing or controlling others in the tasks of the organization. Dealing with the “others” – the employees – is the unpredictable variable when setting goals and determining effectiveness. When it comes time for strategic planning and goal-setting the empathic manager who has taken the time to get to know the employees on a personal level,

determine employees' potential, and understand employees' motivations, may have a real competitive advantage in setting and achieving goals.

### **Empathy Helps Managers Grow**

Managers need to hone personal strengths regarding empathy in the workplace, particularly when working on developing interpersonal competence, the ability to understand others' circumstances. There are four main aspects to interpersonal competence that correlate to aspects inherent to empathy and development (Jeffcoat, 2012). The first is self-awareness. Managers who are resilient have a high level of interpersonal competence and awareness of internal emotional states/situations and how it impacts interactions. The second aspect is self-management or self-control, which is the ability to handle feelings well and not let the feelings control the situation. This speaks to the objectivity that managers need to possess, whether over employees' emotions or the manager's own emotions. Interpersonal competence and self-control focus on the "self" aspect of empathy and interpersonal competence because empathy needs to start from within. However, empathy is an action to be taken, not a feeling, so it is important to remember the implementation component and the willingness to empathize in concrete, specific ways (Shapiro, 2002).

The two other main concepts of interpersonal competence focus on action-based ideas (Jeffcoat, 2012). Social awareness is the ability to see another person's perspective as well as tune into unspoken signals, being able to fit the puzzle pieces together into the big picture. Social awareness also encompasses being aware of the current socioeconomic, physiological, psychological, and other environmental states in which the employee, organization or even world exist. The final concept, relationship management, encompasses all of the other aspects and includes reading the emotional needs of others and taking steps to meet those needs. Developing manager-employee relationships is important not only because it makes it easier to get employee buy-in and compliance with management decisions, but it also makes the manager's job more rewarding by developing these fulfilling relationships at work. (Shapiro, 2002) The aspect of relationship building helps managers use empathy to understand the behaviors and thought processes of employees, allowing the focus to be on what the employee is going through, rather than what the manager is experiencing. Relationship management is important in developing personal resilience in management due to the ability to detach from the situation without seeming indifferent.

Empathy starts with taking care of the self including focusing on how personal experiences relate to the current situation to make it easier to sort out real feelings from those perceived by taking the others' perspective. Interpersonal competence, the ability to understand and empathize with others' circumstances, stems from a high level of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage emotions in a way that does not negatively impact others. Having a high emotional intelligence can lead to a high level of social awareness which can be helpful in effectively managing relationships with others (Jeffcoat, 2012). In the empathic relationship developed between managers and employees, an environment can emerge that is conducive to a free flow of ideas without judgment, benefitting all involved. Good ideas come from every level of an organization; therefore taking the time to listen to employees might be very profitable for the organization. Task-oriented managers are often characterized as serious and using a one-way communication style while emotional managers are described as friendly and use two-way communication that emphasizes emotions to influence employee motivation. (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005). Managers require a balance between these factors in order to be effective in the role of leading tasks and managing employees. Empathy creates this balance.

Managers taking the time to empathically coach and mentor employees throughout their careers also reap benefits from this action. There is a great sense of accomplishment and pride that comes from helping employees achieve goals and recognition from others that a manager may have had a role in an employee's success (Johnston, 2012). Mentorship relationships are often two-way streets and can teach the manager as much about his or her position and what s/he wants from life, as it can for the employee in the protégée position.

### **Empathy Training in Action – What Next?**

Studies reviewed in the medical fields indicate that empathy is a skill that can be taught. Empathy scores increased after training modules were given, with overall empathy scores maintaining over time (Wheeler & Barrett, 1994). When the medical fields teach students to be empathic towards patients, generally two approaches to teaching empathy emerge: behavioral (skills-based) and attitudinal. A significant amount of formal training focuses on teaching empathy as a behavioral skill and defines empathy as a set of discrete behaviors that can be analyzed and learned (Shapiro, 2002). Behaviorists focus on breaking empathy down into a series of verbal and behavioral steps which trainees visualize doing first, and then implement. Others who adhere to a more attitudinal approach feel that focusing on techniques can make empathy seem forced and insincere. Attitudinal trainers feel it is imperative that learners develop a personal empathic style and find unique words rather than use specific phrases and techniques (Shapiro, 2002).

These techniques used to training individuals in empathy can be applied in the business world. Managers that are naturally prone to empathy will take the more attitudinal approach. These managers will benefit from personal empathy style assessment complete with methods to apply that to the overall managerial style being used. Managers without a natural inclination to be empathic will need help identifying and applying empathic behaviors.

From this review of the literature on empathy in management, it is possible to derive a definition of empathy as applied to the managerial role. We suggest that, as applied to management, empathy is the ability to see and understand all aspects of an employee and situation without losing sight of self or the objectivity required to do what is expected and what is best for all involved. It is important to convey empathic attitudes when interacting with employees. Some of these attitudes include patience, respect, being fully present and engaged, connecting on a human level, being nonjudgmental and taking seriously what the employee is saying (Shapiro, 2002).

Several skills can be developed to convey empathic behaviors that fall into three main categories – verbal, reflective listening, and nonverbal. All of these can complement each other and, when used correctly together, convey great empathy to the employee. It is important, first and foremost, to listen without interrupting (CUNA, 2009). Action oriented managers are apt to cut people off midsentence instead of listening (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996). This can inadvertently send a message to the employee that “what I have to say is more important than what you have to say.” Another disadvantageous activity to creating an empathic environment is making too quick of an interpretation of what the other person is saying. Empathic managers take the time to listen without initially judging to get the full picture before jumping to conclusions. Managers also need to be sure to use appropriate language when giving feedback. The manager should consider the situation and the employee before speaking to avoid saying something damaging to the situation or something that offends or alienates the employee.

Reflective listening is characterized by clarifying what is being said by either paraphrasing or acknowledging. When paraphrasing to an employee, a manager should state the feeling the employee is experiencing and the reason for this experience to ensure correct interpretation (CUNA, 2009). The manager should also acknowledge to the employee an understanding of the employee’s frame of reference to help generate trust, and be aware of the messages nonverbal cues can be sending. The manager should use appropriate nonverbals to display empathy, such as maintaining eye contact in a non-threatening way and using a steady tone of voice when addressing the employee. Many natural empathizers mirror the body language of the person with whom they are conversing. Managers who utilize this skill with employees help to show a strong connection and create the inner cues that contribute to understanding and experiencing what the employee is going through (Hoffman, 1981). Keeping facial expressions as neutral as possible is also important to convey empathy. To be empathic, managers need to be concerned with the organizational context and that includes the components of the messages and how the messages are delivered and received.

## **Practice Makes Perfect**

For the novice empathizing manager this influx of behavior and skill information can seem overwhelming at first. A general empathy training module that encompasses the information presented above is important for exhibiting the importance of empathy in management and the skills that need to be developed. But, there is no “empathy switch” to flip and instantly be viewed as a more empathic manager simply from participation in training and knowledge of empathy as a managerial construct. For managers who are not naturally inclined to be empathic this will take time and work but the long-term benefits for the manager as well as the organization may far outweigh any negatives from the time and effort spent. Setting smaller goals such as inputting employees’ birthdays into a calendar and sending out birthday messages, or writing down one non-work related fact about every employee and starting up a conversation about that fact might go a long way towards developing empathy skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

From this review of the literature and research, we contend that empathy as a managerial construct has been largely overlooked by researchers and practitioners. Despite the many potential benefits of empathic behavior, developing empathy among managers has not been an emphasis of organizations. Management has tended to focus on issues of effectiveness and efficiency, trying to generate increased results from fewer resources. While this is the essence of managerial practice, the fact that results are to be generated through people separate the practice of management from other organizational activities. Developing a genuine understanding of the employees being managed is an essential element in effective managerial practice.

There is a significant need for empirical research to understand the development of empathy in managers and the relationship between empathy and desired organization results. While empathy has long been accepted as an important element of health care practice, there has been little to explore the influence of managerial empathy on organization health. Empathy has been shown to be a measurable construct; research relating empathy to other measurable organization outcomes is sorely needed.

For practitioners, existing knowledge on empathy and the development of empathic behaviors should be applied through training and developmental programs to enhance empathy among managers. The ability to “get into the other’s world” may be an important skill for managers to develop. The tendency of practitioners has been to treat employees’ emotions and feelings as variables to be manipulated through managerial practices such as reward systems, motivational schemes, communications, etc., for the purpose of achieving desired outcomes. Empathy suggests that understanding others simply for the sake of understanding, may accrue benefits to the organization beyond those driven by existing practice. Indeed, as more and more organizations find that value is found in the knowledge of employees, increasing managerial empathy may be useful to support and enhance knowledge-based work.

In summary, we believe that the concept of empathy may hold great promise for enhancing managerial effectiveness. Empathy has already been found to generate positive outcomes in counseling, human services, and health care. It appears that by properly incorporating empathy into managerial practice, additional organizational outcomes can be enhanced. Employee retention, satisfaction, commitment, and motivation are a few of the outcomes that may be influenced by managerial empathy. By enhancing managers’ understanding of employees, empathy can aid in developing relationships that can create positive results for organizations. Managers should be aware that empathy is an action to be taken for the welfare of the employees, the managers, and the welfare of the organization as a whole.

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