

Empathy Underrated?

Soft-Skills Offer Solid Value

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

IN CONTRAST TO THE ONGOING CONVERSATION ABOUT technological advancement, the topic of empathy is turning up everywhere these days—in best-selling books, in surveys, and perhaps not surprisingly, at conferences exploring the future of the workplace. While an admirable trait, empathy is also being proven a powerful edge, a conduit to deeper understanding, better responsiveness and improved communication between employees, managers and HR professionals.

Automation Drives Focus on Human Sphere

While the technologies of artificial intelligence continue to expand into the human realm—driving cars, performing surgery, and generating quarterly reports—a very real question emerges concerning what we might be doing for work in the future.

“Don’t ask what computers can’t do,” said Geoff Colvin, author of *Humans Are Underrated*, during his keynote address at the recent HRMAX Conference in Vancouver. A better question, he affirms, is: “What are humans most driven to do?”

This question drives our inquiry in the right direction, towards the essence of what it means to be a fully-functioning human being, and to what we will always do better than computers—empathizing, synthesizing and storytelling. Indeed, as Colvin eloquently explained, we are hard-wired for such deep human interaction, and that expresses itself best within these three main spheres of activity.

Empathy, Synthesis and Story

Empathy provides the ability to discern what another human being is feeling, and to respond in an appropriate way. It provides even greater benefit in group settings; when it comes to problem solving, as a team, Colvin points out that better solutions are found when social sensitivity is heightened among members of the team. Furthermore, we know that group-driven or collective intelligence can ignite and reveal better solutions than any one human person could identify.

Lastly, Colvin stated that storytelling, which reaches us emotionally, is a powerful way to connect people, infuse inspiration and stimulate engagement. For those who are masterful in the art of empathy, collaboration, storytelling and synthesizing complex thoughts, it is empowering to know that such skills sets are increasingly valued and sought after across major industries.

For HR professionals, it is solid confirmation of the hard value of soft-skills within any organization—and within ourselves.

Neuroscience and Peak Performance

Further acknowledgement of the value of storytelling stemmed from another HRMAX presenter’s session on neuroscience; Matt Summers confirmed Colvin’s findings and explained that adult learning is best integrated and most effective when it is blended with anecdote that touches us emotionally. This engages the full mind; because our brains love to make sense of things, a meaningful story further engages our energies and motivation. Summers also emphasized the impact of stress on any such effectiveness, due to its ability to generate cortisol and trigger the amygdala into a fight or flight reaction while shutting down the reflective pre-front cortex where learning is integrated.

In interview, Summers pointed out that not all stress is necessarily negative, stating that if our workplaces could generate eustress—the positive stress that enhances motivation—we would more consistently reach our desired levels of peak performance. Between complacency and extreme stress, there is a sweet spot of optimal stress which engages our best, allowing us to tap into our most valuable resources.

Additionally, Summers emphasized that in heightened states of functioning and awareness, we are much more likely to provide an empathic response to a distressed teammate and to be more collaborative in approach. He also pointed

out that there is a wealth of research which shows the morning hours to be more conducive to such efforts, providing better focus and therefore execution of work.

From Empathy to Appreciation

Empathy in a good leader or manager should reveal what every HR professional already knows—within every human being lies a desire to be seen, heard and valued at work. Unfortunately, as psychologist and author Dr. Paul White mentioned in his session on appreciation at HRMAX, this is not necessarily the case.

Moreover, White pointed out that many leaders and supervisors are reluctant to admit that they do not know how to give appreciation effectively. Common excuses given include that they don’t have time, that worrying about the bottom line is more



Matt Summers

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important, and that employees get paid to do their work.

With the book he co-authored, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation at Work*, and training sessions, White is helping to change that prevailing attitude. His goal is to transform toxic workplaces where employees suffer from a negative atmosphere and the lack of feeling valued and appreciated—into something positive and productive.

In conversation, White emphasized the importance of authentic appreciation. Such sincerity can be conveyed with specific positive comments about actions taken at work, as well as the personal and unique qualities of the employee. The true value of this is hardly soft, White says, with research showing such efforts can yield less tardiness and turnover, as well as reducing resistance to change among employees.

Surveys Confirm What Matters

Significantly, employees better appreciate their workplace and are more likely to stay with their position when they have a good relationship with their manager. This is one of the strong conclusions drawn from the *Fraser Jones Asia-Pacific HR Salary Survey for 2016* which asked HR professionals what motivated them to stay with their employers. Similarly, when the *Global Outlook Survey of 2015* asked what change in leadership skills are required to win confidence and trust in consumers as well as employees, the strongest responses included strong communication skills, empathy, courage, morality and a collaborative nature.

This survey was quoted in Cheryl Cran's new book, *The Art of Change Leadership: Driving Transformation in a Fast-Paced World*. In conversation, Cran affirmed that in her consultative work with large companies she is both fostering and witnessing the aforementioned shift. She too emphasizes that empathy is among the soft-skills helping to generate the transformation from autocratic leadership to a collaborative approach that yields strong results and keeps employees more content.



Dr. Paul White

Empathy in Daily Workplaces

Coaching managers to keep their employees engaged and productive through encouragement and empathic support has been an important part of Marsha Goldford's work as a senior HR leader over the past 17 years. Goldford points out that when empathy is blended with observation and inquisitiveness, it leads to better communication and to the use of more compassionate language.

For example, if an employee suddenly comes to work late for a few days, rather than reacting with blame or a reproaching tone, an empathic HR professional would share their observation, and then kindly ask if there are specific reasons leading to the unusual lateness. Another example related to the importance of carefully choosing our words is when giving feedback; avoid using extreme words such as "never" and "always," as these words are likely to make employees feel defensive, thus impinging on any part of the message being conveyed.

Moreover, Goldford believes that as HR professionals, we must guard against the risks of confusing empathy with emotionality. We make best use of empathy when we are grounded in a balanced "backbone and heart" approach coupled with strong self-regulation that models a productive and calm state of mind. This in turn inspires trust.

When trust, empathy, collaboration and strong relationships reign supreme in the workplace, we thrive and create a ripple effect that makes a world of difference in any organization. 📌

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions. (inspiredmomentum.com)

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Vancouver-Nanaimo: 18 minutes

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