

The Art and Impact of Empathy

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

EMPATHY—IT IS WHAT WE SEEK IN OTHERS, AND THEY IN US. It is a part of our human needs: to be heard and have our feelings validated. Otherwise, we may become preoccupied to various degrees with emotional unrest and states of mind no longer conducive to good focus and performance at work.

Those preoccupations can consume an unreal amount of real-time.

The Paradox of Real-time Potential

Although we speak of “real-time” primarily in terms of its online applications, from this perspective we can appreciate it for its responsiveness. To act in real-time is to readily respond to needs as immediately as they arise, whether in crisis, during an onboarding process or in tracking performance progress.

Paradoxically, while we have technologies to assist, and an abundance of data, they lack the human element needed most, the real gem at the core of irreplaceable, human interaction: empathy.

Experts Agree: Empathy Essential

Soft skills, including empathy, are among the four major trends recently identified by LinkedIn research that surveyed more than 5,000 global talent professionals and hiring managers, as reported in the current issue of *Canadian HR Reporter*. With 83 per cent admitting that soft skills are increasingly important to a company’s success, it’s not surprising that such skills keep getting more widely recognized as invaluable.

In the 2018 “State of Workplace Empathy” study, Businessolver reported that when empathy is practiced and valued across all levels, it yields a major long-term payoff—the organization becomes stronger with a more engaged workforce and a healthier, more robust business.

However desirable, such soft skills are still proving hard ones to practice, especially among leaders. For some, focusing on “big picture” preoccupations may exclude a true appreciation for the value of empathy as part of the minutia of human interactions and the core of good communication flow. In our fast-paced, often hurried organizations, some leaders are, consciously or not, alienated from their bodies and “cut off” from the neck down, hence their capacity for genuine empathy may be impaired.

Without a robust flow of reciprocal communications, organizational channels, like arteries, become clogged up, and soon the ripple effect can resemble an implosion of disengagement, resistance to change, demotivation and plummeting performance.

The Neurobiology of Empathy

To really understand the inner workings of empathy, we need only observe our own interactions. Doing so, we could observe a listener’s quality of focus and attention, as well as our own actions: good eye contact, a warm tone of voice, a poised, unhurried way of speaking, and subtle facial expressions indicating the speaker is being understood.

Tone of voice stood out as making a big difference in a piece of research quoted in an article by Daniel Goleman, “The Power of Positive Connections,” posted recently on LinkedIn. In this study, explained Goleman, employees were given positive performance feedback in a cold, distant and negative tone of voice. Despite the good news, they came away feeling bad. In the same study, others were given negative performance feedback in a warm, supportive tone of voice; they left feeling somewhat upbeat despite the bad news.

As expressed above, from a neurobiological perspective, empathy requires that we resonate with another’s experience; resonance happens through the mirror neuron system of the brain, transformed into the sensations and feelings we experience in our bodies.

Working together with leaders throughout organizations, HR professionals can help to raise awareness of the inner workings of empathy; when we are mindful of our tone of voice, and other subtleties of communication, we are more likely to activate that empathic potential. With empathy as a frame of mind, we better appreciate the reality of others and refrain from imposing our perceptions of reality on them. This in turn fosters more conscious and respectful relationships in which trust and good communication is more likely to flow and be sustained.

A Tryptic of Empathy

Moreover, while empathy is essential, so too is recognizing it comes in multiple forms. As explained by Carolyn Stern, a certified emotional intelligence trainer, as well as a professor at the School of Business at Capilano University and owner of EI Experience, a firm that creates comprehensive learning and development experiences for corporations, there are three types of empathy to consider.

Stern explains that cognitive empathy is about perspective taking: knowing how a person feels and what they may be thinking. Emotional empathy involves a deeper sharing and resonance with the emotions of others. In this resonance, we may feel another’s pain as we might remember a similar experience in our past.

Thirdly, there is compassionate empathy, which when we practice and express becomes a catalyst for action. For example, if

someone on your team loses a loved one, you might not only send condolence, but also offer practical help. On a corporate level, this kind of empathy sometime gives rise to social responsibility initiatives that strive to address a significant cause.

Growing, Knowing and Flowing

Those seeking to enhance their capacity for empathy, says Stern, need only get curious and in touch with their own emotions, listening intently while also paying attention to non-verbal cues. She also emphasizes the importance of maintaining healthy boundaries and some degree of detachment to guard against becoming enmeshed with employees and their emotions. Such imbalance can cause an HR professional or manager to keep employees in their comfort zone rather than continue to gently challenge them while supporting their growth and development.

When we are in flow with a good balance of empathy in relation to others, we naturally express a willingness to be appropriately vulnerable, transparent and honest as we remove the corporate mask or persona. Stern reminds us that strong two-way communications is not just about good listening, but also includes discernment when we speak and carefully choose our words.

Ultimately, Stern likens empathy to the “secret sauce” that enables employees to know a company’s leadership cares and is interested in learning about their values and their intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, as well as what inspires and informs their commitment to their job. Without this commitment, employees may just end up doing the bare essentials while falling short of being fully engaged or tapping their deeper potential.

The Female Empathy Advantage

Fortunately, the rising recognition of the hard value of soft skills appears to parallel the rising responsibility and recognition of the HR profession itself—and perhaps for a demographically good reason.

Turning back to the “State of Workplace Empathy” study, the corresponding article points out that gender differences exist and are increasingly recognized. When it comes to empathy, generally speaking, women tend to embrace it, feel it and express it more readily.

In fact, as part of this study’s findings, 81 percent of CEOs believe that having more women in leadership positions would increase an organization’s empathy, with strong majorities of employees and HR professionals agreeing. Participants viewed female employees as the most empathetic, and 91 per cent percent of minority respondents rated diversity in leadership as important for increasing an organization’s empathy.

Following his keynote at the recent HR Conference + Tradeshow 2019, author and keynote speaker Ron Tite also echoed the belief that when more women are among the top echelons, empathy in action is more likely to show up and become pervasive in the culture.

Don’t Let Hierarchy Hide Horizons

When asked how HR professionals might bridge the empathy gap between them and company leadership, Tite suggested that the enduring structures of hierarchy be removed when possible to better establish lines of communication and connections. Once removed, the flow of communication and ideas can become free flowing, enabling everyone to be heard.

If we take the example of employee engagement initiatives, Tite shared, we see that in large organizations, too many layers of people get in the way and, as a result, great ideas are often killed in the scaffolds of hierarchy. However, when we boldly remove the scaffolding, and people get together in an authentic way outside of the formal hierarchy, employees are much more likely to speak comfortably about what they really need to performance better and remain engaged.

By helping to create these opportunities, HR professionals allow for candid feelings and perspectives to be shared. In revealing such truths, the channels of communication are infused with renewed energy, empathy and productivity. 🗣️

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.

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