**TCHIM TABARO**

**ID UD76044HCO85226**

**EMPATHY IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS**

School: Social and Human Studies

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# **EMPATHY IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS**

Ten years back, I was working for a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) as a Programme Manager. One of my programme components included Education within which there were a subcomponent on Special Education for children challenged with disability.

The time I went for a field visit, I was well welcome by the Teachers and the very cheerful Children: dump, crimpled, etc.

Then, I had to deliver a message that was translated into blind language. Later, I decided to give more attention to that particular programme besides the rest of the programmes including Health component, Environmental, Water and sanitation etc...

I was wondering whether it was pity, compassion, or empathy.

This leads to all the questions we can raise when it comes to Empathy:

* What is it?
* How different is it as compared to sympathy and compassion?
* How empathy can help us be successful in a society that seems to be more individual every day
* Is it important in Project/Program Management?
* How do I feel others think? “Putting myself in other’s shoes and have a different perspective of the world around”!

We will attempt to clarify these few questions in this conversation.

1. **Empathy, Sympathy and Compassion**.

Empathy, as I learned from high school, is formed from two words “*Inside- feelings*” Which means that having empathy with somebody is like sharing feelings with that somebody-

Empathy can be defined as a person’s ability to recognize and share the emotions of another person, fictional character, or sentient being. It involves, first, seeing someone else’s situation from his perspective, and second, sharing his emotions, including, if any, his distress.

For me to share in someone else’s perspective, I must do more than merely put myself into his position. Instead, I must imagine myself as him, and, more than that, imagine myself as him in the particular situation in which he finds himself. To empathize with a particular person, one needs to have at least some knowledge of who the person is and what he/she is doing or trying to do.

Empathy means then that one has the capacity of understanding the feelings one somebody else

Empathy could be, as reviewed by (Psychology Today's Staff, 2022), the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person, animal, or fictional character. Developing empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately. It involves experiencing another person’s point of view, rather than just one’s own, and enables prosocial or helping behaviours that come from within, rather than being forced.

But in day-to-day life, we do not really establish the difference between empathy and sympathy. In fact, in French common habits, sympathy is more used than empathy.

What is it then the difference?

I remember, once in the 90’s, as I worked with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)- Youth program in West Africa - Ivory Cost: “*A a young man riding a bicycle hit an old lady who fell. The young man continued without helping the old lady to stand up. Then the lady screamed”: gentlemen! You just left something fall. And the gentlemen turned back and searched around the lady. Then the lady told him: my boy, don’t lose your time searching. What you just lost you will not retrieve it. You lost your humanity*”.

This is a direct translation from French. And my comment here is that the gentlemen did not demonstrate empathy at all.

Indeed, Empathy is often confused with sympathy, and compassion and even pity.

Empathy, sympathy, and compassion are often used interchangeably, but [they are not the same](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201505/empathy-vs-sympathy). They are all referring to some reactions to the plight of others.

Let’s do some etymological thinking here.

For the psychologist (Titchener, 1909) *,* Empathy can be defined as a person’s ability to recognize and share the emotions of another person, fictional character, or sentient being. Meaning “Fellow *feelings*”, It involves, first, seeing someone else’s situation from his perspective, and, Sympathy, (‘fellow feeling’, ‘community of feeling’) is a feeling of care and concern for someone, often someone close, accompanied by a wish to see him/her better off or happier.

Sympathy is feeling of concern for someone else, and a desire that they become happier or better off, while empathy involves sharing the other person’s emotions.

Compared to pity, sympathy implies a greater sense of shared similarities together with a more profound personal engagement. However, sympathy, unlike empathy, does not involve a shared perspective or shared emotions, and while the facial expressions of sympathy do convey caring and concern, they do not convey shared distress.

Sympathy and empathy often lead to each other, but not always. For instance, it is possible to sympathize with such things as hedgehogs and ladybirds, but not, strictly speaking, to empathize with them. Conversely, psychopaths with absolutely no sympathy for their victims can nonetheless make use of empathy to ensnare or torture them. Sympathy should also be distinguished from benevolence, which is a much more detached and impartial attitude.

Pity on the other hand is a feeling of discomfort at the distress of one or more sentient beings and often has paternalistic or condescending overtones. Implicit in the notion of pity is that its object does not deserve its plight, and, moreover, is unable to prevent, reverse, or overturn it. Pity is less engaged than empathy, sympathy, or compassion, amounting to little more than a conscious acknowledgment of the plight of its objectives

Compassion or "suffering alongside" someone, is more engaged than simple empathy and is associated with an active desire to alleviate the suffering of its object. With empathy, I share your emotions; with compassion, I not only share your emotions but also elevate them into a universal and transcending experience. Compassion, which builds upon empathy, is one of the main motivators of [altruism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/altruism).

Compassion is an empathic understanding of a person's feelings accompanied by [altruism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/altruism), or a desire to act on that person's behalf , sharing his emotions, including, if any, his distress.

1. **How can empathy help us be successful in a society that seems to be more individual every day?**

Empathy helps us connect and help others, but like other traits, it may have evolved with a selfish motive: using others as a “social antenna” to help detect danger. From an evolutionary perspective, creating a mental model of another person's intent is critical: the arrival of an interloper, for example, could be deadly, so developing sensitivity to the signals of others could be lifesaving.

Do children develop empathy?

Babies display an understanding that people’s actions are guided by intentions and are able to act on that understanding before they are 18 months old, including trying to comfort a parent. More advanced reasoning about other people’s thoughts develops by around age 5 or 6, and research shows that parents who promote and model empathy raise more empathetic children.

But empathy isn’t important simply because it’s good to care about others in their unique situations. It can serve as the foundation for better customer recommendations and offerings at touchpoints, which can have a major impact on revenue growth.

Empathy is about more than making an offer to others, it’s about making a connection with them in the moment.

Empathy is often regarded as one of those "soft" leadership skills (unlike, say, authority, technical prowess, or the ability to present effectively to an audience the size of a small city). But when you consider that effective management is all about accomplishing work through others, it's short-sighted to dismiss it too quickly.

1. **Is it important in (Project/Program) Management?**

Empathy Is a Key to Successful Management. Unfortunately, it's an attribute many managers lack.

As a manager I don't believe I ever really thought much about "empathy" per se. I was probably too busy trying to keep my head above water to articulate it that way. But I did believe in getting to know my employees individually and trying (not always successfully) to have some understanding of what was going on in their lives and to gain at least some insight into what motivated them.

And I would definitely say that the most effective managers I knew —front-line to CEO — were individuals who invariably were able to connect with their employees... and did have an understanding of what made them tick.

After all, as noted earlier, management is the science of accomplishing work through others. Easy to forget, but always worth bearing in mind. So, in other words, empathy is essential in the workplace.

In research fields, empathy is “hot.” Out of my experience, I know that psychologists and neuroscientists have published considerable ongoing studies in fields as far-ranging as aesthetic experience to sports to [leadership](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/leadership). Certainly, within the business environment, conversations around empathy have become a prominent topic of discussion.

Yet not all empathy is equal, per se. It’s useful to refine our understanding of empathy and its usefulness.

The term itself was [first introduced](https://philpapers.org/rec/BRAIAE-3) by psychologist (Titchener, 1909) which is how empathy is distinct from sympathy.

While sympathy indicates a less active involvement in the feelings of other people, as we said above, empathy involves a more active involvement to experience vicariously somebody else’s emotional or psychological state.

Author and winner of the 2002 *Nobel Prize* (Khneman, 2011) wrote about the impact of empathy in business in his book “[Thinking Fast and Slow](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0141033576)”.

In it, he highlights empathy as a key concept for business—and often one which is intuitively understood. Says *Kahneman:* “We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think.”

This idea that empathy is a useful quality in businesses has been supported by prominent CEO’s such as (Nadella, 2017), CEO of Microsoft. In an *interview* with CBS Good Morning, she said that “Empathy is everything even in a business context. There was no way we could innovate without having a deeper sense of empathy.”

In a white paper entitled [Empathy in the Workplace: A Tool for Effective Leadership](http://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/EmpathyInTheWorkplace.pdf), the Centre for Creative Leadership analysed data from 6,731 managers from 38 countries to gain insight into the impact of empathy on leadership. Their research discovered that leaders who showed more empathy were perceived as better performers.

Not So Fast.

The psychologist (Bloom, 2016) from University of Toronto is sceptical about putting too much weight behind empathy. In [Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Against-Empathy-Case-Rational-Compassion/dp/0062339338), Bloom analyses the limitations—and even the dangers—of empathy when it comes to [decision-making](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/decision-making).

"The idea I’ll explore is that the act of feeling what you think others are feeling, whatever one chooses to call this, is different from being compassionate, from being kind, and most of all, from being good. From a moral standpoint, we’re better off without it."

From his research, Bloom suggests that rather than choosing a course of action based on our feelings of a given situation, there are better ways to make productive and useful decisions.

Leadership & empathy expert (Bravo), who teaches leadership courses at the University of Washington, Bothell, says that: "Empathy is most effectively used to inform rather than directly influence leader decision-making.” In an email interview, she notes that under [stressful](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/stress) situations or when under pressure from team members, leaders might not monitor their own feelings effectively. In such “times of low self-monitoring, excessive empathy can sway a leader to react solely based upon an emotional response rather than respond based on a blend of facts, data, and emotional understanding."

So is empathy a redundant trait for successful leaders in business, and how can you know if it’s the right choice?

The psychologist (Bloom, 2016) has some clues as to how to resolve Bloom’s concerns. He posits that, in fact, there are three types of empathy.

* Cognitive empathy is about knowing and understanding how someone else feels,
* Emotional empathy is experiencing the feelings of another person,
* Compassionate empathy involves feeling and understanding what another person is going through and being moved to do something about the situation.

Cognitive and emotional empathy each have their drawbacks for a leader. Cognitive empathy involves a level of detachment, while emotional empathy can be almost totally overwhelming.

Yet compassionate empathy can reconcile the concerns of Bloom in a way which is constructive for leaders.

Rather than a ‘nice-to-have’ soft skill, having empathy as a leader can help you improve your leadership, the engagement of your team, and your communication with customers or clients.

*Bravo* notes that: "Just like we moderate our speed when driving a car, leaders can moderate their degree of empathy. When we drive, we know our tendencies and use that in combination with an assessment of the environmental conditions to inform our optimal speed and corresponding actions. By assessing their [empathetic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy) tendencies and the conditions of the people and work environment, leaders can determine whether they need to dial empathy up or down to optimize effectiveness."

Despite this importance, the study also concluded that only "40% of frontline leaders" were "proficient or strong in empathy."

In short, there was a substantive gap between a valuable management attribute and the common possession of that attribute.

*No time for empathy*

Empathy is often regarded as one of those "soft" [leadership](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/leadership) skills (unlike, say, authority, technical prowess, or the ability to present effectively to an audience the size of a small city). But when you consider that effective management is all about accomplishing work through others, it's short-sighted to dismiss it too quickly.

In short, there was a substantive gap between a valuable management attribute and the common possession of that attribute.

"We know from research that empathy is on the decline," says (McCann), the Chief Human Resources Officer at [BetterWorks](https://www.betterworks.com/), who has studied the subject. "That's unfortunate considering it's one of the most critical capabilities needed to lead and drive employee engagement in a diverse, dispersed and constantly changing environment. Having powerful [empathetic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy) conversations is a critical piece of being a great manager, and to truly hear the employee, deep listening and suspended judgment are needed skills. Yet in the busy world in which managers are entrenched, both of these skills are a real challenge."

Here are some recommendations:

a. *Be present with your team*

Engaging and taking time with your team is a vital way to encourage engagement and enthusiasm. (Sandberg, 2017), COO of Facebook, says that: “Instead of offering to do anything, just do something.”

By offering options, instead of an open choice, it shows a commitment to really making a difference, and a respect for your team member’s needs.

b. *Be aware of other people’s needs*

A [study published in the Journal of Neuroscience](http://www.jneurosci.org/content/36/17/4719): (Neuroscience, April 17, 2016) found that as a way of thinking, the more time and [attention](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attention) participants spent thinking empathically, the more sensitive they become.

1. **Put yourself in other’s shoes and have a different perspective of the world around you!**

Putting oneself into other’s shoes has never been an easy thing. It is about the ability to experience and understand what others feel while maintaining a clear discernment about your own and the other person’s feelings and perspectives (Journal of Consciousness Studies, 2001)

On another level *Professor* *Brown* (Brown, n.d.), University of Huston, Texas in this interesting YouTube video shows the relationships between people when it comes to Empathy” [Brené Brown on Empathy - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw)

What is the best way to ease someone's pain and suffering? In this beautifully animated short video, Dr Brené Brown reminds us that we can only create a genuine empathic connection if we are brave enough to really get in touch with our own fragilities.

He rightly adds that: “*Empathy is a vulnerable choice. In order to connect with somebody (putting myself into his/her choses), I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feelings*”

I've also learned that there are 4 types of people who try to comfort you.

1) The moose who tries to say "*At least*." in everything, hoping to cheer you up. They're the ones that keep saying, "*Look towards the future!" and "Move on!*"

2) Those that don't know what to say, so they just ignore you and hope that by the time they connect back with you after several months and years, you'll be perfectly fine again. They're the ones that don't know how to do the healing, so they simply ask, "*How are you*?" every time they see you, hoping that they will finally hear "*good" from you.*

3) Those that don't know what to say, so they start talking about how good their life is and obviously try too hard to make the mood light and happy, which ends up doing the opposite effect.

4) The bear. The ones that simply listen and say, "*That is traumatic*." and "*It's okay to cry.*"

Finally, I concur with Dr Brené Brown who concludes by saying that: "Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience" - Empathy doesn't start with 'at least', or 'chin up', or 'get it together' or 'get over it'... it starts with the **silence of listening**.

We need to remember to be this way towards our own selves as well! Relate with ourselves and be kind with ourselves, THAT is intimacy and power. Then you can share what you have developed with others that are in your life and be a healing force in this world. Leading by example and putting yourself in someone else’s shoes can help you to develop empathy as well as to establish it as a core principle of your team.

The importance of empathy does not mean that it is necessarily an easy task. To avoid the overwhelm of emotional empathy, and to keep a clear head, you have to take care of your own needs.

Don’t leave yourself empty with trying to help others and not taking care of yourself. Take time every week to do something you enjoy and recharge your batteries. Engage with friends, family, and take time for your needs.

I will end with Anthony’s Queen (Queen, 2020) thinking: *Sympathy = "I see your pain". Empathy = "I feel your pain"*

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