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Abstract

Theorists across a range of practical and academic disciplines say we are entering “The Age of Empathy.” Having been lately “rediscovered” as an innate capacity to experience the others’ emotions from their perspective and to respond accordingly, empathy is a complex process that combines affective, cognitive, and communicative components.

Empathic leadership is based on the thinking that we are connected with each other and that societies have survived due to our ability to feel for the other and respond. Research shows that empathic leaders create emotional bonds and are therefore competent in understanding and addressing their team’s and customer’s needs, appreciating and drawing on people’s talents, recognizing others’ perspectives in problem solving and including them in decision-making.

This allows for a culture of trust, openness, and cooperation to flourish amongst teams and organizations. Empathic leadership in organizations is not a dualistic leader–follower transaction based on a detached individual’s influence on others. Instead, it is a collaborative process based on deep participation and mutual receptivity. More importantly, empathic leadership opens the way for relational, shared, distributed, and co-creative leadership perspectives.

Empathy can be developed through both cognitive and affective experiences. Organizations are investing in the development of empathy for both their employees and clients and Business Schools are starting to include aspects of empathy development in the curriculum.

The shaping of empathic leadership calls for an adventure in interrelationship!

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Introduction

In today's fast paced, globalized, technologically advanced environment leaders are called to address economic and efficiency-related challenges but mostly human challenges. New understandings of organization as an interconnected whole and of leadership as distributed¹ and co-created² call for a reevaluation of traditional leadership discourses. Our ideas that organizational leaders should be competitive, uncompromising, and directive are being challenged by research suggesting that the most effective leaders are the ones who are emotionally intelligent.³ Leadership is becoming relational and cannot be seen anymore as something that can be found within a self-contained individual.

To succeed in this environment, leaders are being called to be empathic to feel, understand, respond to and address emotional needs at individual, team, and organizational levels. Kohut⁴ saw empathy as the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person, and other definitions see it as the process of experiencing others' emotions from their frame of reference or simply putting oneself in another's shoes! It is considered a sophisticated skill or process that combines affective (being sensitive to the others' emotions), cognitive (observing and mentally processing others' emotions) and communicative (responding appropriately to others emotions) components.⁵

Empathy is based on a different understanding of reality and human relationships; it is closely entwined to our worldview and our conception of the self. Relational perspectives of the self do not position the individual separately from its environment. A famous quote by Albert Einstein says: "A human being is a part of a whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security."⁶

Einstein's remedy for the delusion, that we are separate from each other, is to intentionally cultivate compassion for all life and to understand that we are parts of an interconnected whole. In fact, Professor de Waal's⁷ research in primates'

¹ Gronn (2002).

² Avolio (2011).

³ Goleman et al. (2002).

⁴ Kohut (1984).

⁵ Rogers (1957b), Davis (1983, 1996).

⁶ Kabat-Zinn (1996).

⁷ De Waal (2010).

emotions supports that we are hardwired for empathy, connected to living beings through an innate urge for feeling for each other, which is what has kept societies together. He calls for an age of empathy that would address most of our societal challenges.



Free Empathy: OccupyWallStreet_10-20-2011-0036 (Solow 2011)

Management thinkers and a few forward thinking organizations have understood this and are already working with and recruiting for empathy. George Anders in two LinkedIn Influencers articles argues that empathy will be a must have skill in 2020 and that it is already emerging as a prerequisite for not only mid-career customer facing jobs but for highly paid jobs at the high end of the job market. In a database research, he found at least 1000 organizations valuing empathy in job descriptions and recruiting ads, including multinationals such as Barclays Capital, Mars, McKinsey, Microsoft, Symantec, Pfizer, and Raytheon⁸.

The Business Case for Empathy and Leadership

The Empathic Leader

Empathy is underrepresented in leadership literature often perceived as contradicting the stereotype of the powerful leader. However, empathy is not pity or sympathy, and the empathic leader is not someone who would feel overwhelmed by others'

⁸ Anders (2013a, 2013b). Run a search for "empathy" among LinkedIn job adverts and list employers' different ways of using empathy skills

emotions. Rogers explains that empathy involves entering another's world without prejudice, which requires a person secure enough to put themselves aside for the moment. He adds that "being empathic is a complex, demanding, strong yet subtle and gentle way of being."⁹

Emphasizing similar strong but gentle ways of being, research shows the strong relationship between empathy and current theories of leadership. In transformational leadership, empathic leaders engage in individual consideration¹⁰ listening to and treating each person in a unique way, while empathy is one of the main components of EI (emotional intelligence).¹¹ In authentic leadership, leaders try to be objective about others' perspectives while being open about their own perspectives (balanced processing) and share their core feelings, motives, and inclinations with others (relational transparency).¹² Finally, empathic leaders create high-quality LMX (leader-member exchange) relationships.¹³

Another pioneer in empathy research, Kohut,¹⁴ considered empathy a way of understanding which should not be confused with being nice or compassionate. To create a culture of openness and trust for empathy to flourish, leaders (that means everyone in a distributed or shared leadership environment) need to adopt a stance of "positive regard,"¹⁵ a nonjudgmental attitude towards others so that they can "see" them without prejudice. In feeling that they are not judged, others feel free to express their creativity. If, for example, this attitude is adopted during performance appraisal meetings, it would help the appraiser understand the appraisee's situation from their perspective rather than criticize. At the same time, it would allow the appraisee to feel understood and be open to discuss possibilities for improvement rather than having to defend themselves.

The ability to "see" others without prejudice allows leaders understand others' potential and needs so that they can set relevant, motivating, and achievable goals. Moreover, the ability to be aware of team dynamics while combining affective, cognitive, and communicative qualities can lead to better informed, more inclusive problem solving and participative decision-making.

⁹ Rogers (1957a), p. 4. "To be with another in this way means that for the time being you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another's world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self and this can only be done by a person who is secure enough in himself that he knows he will not get lost in what may turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and can comfortably return to his own world when he wishes. Perhaps this description makes clear that being empathic is a complex demanding, strong yet subtle and gentle way of being"

¹⁰ Bass (1985).

¹¹ Goleman (1995).

¹² Luthans and Avolio (2003), Kernis (2003).

¹³ Mahsud et al. (2010).

¹⁴ Kohut (1977).

¹⁵ Rogers (1959).



Empathy: Part of the FLOW market exhibit at the Dansk Design Center. These items were actually for sale (Phaneuf 2007)

The Empathic Workplace

Culture of Empathy in Teams

Most writers insist that empathy is mostly caught rather than taught¹⁶ arguing that the most efficient way to create an empathic culture amongst a group is to demonstrate empathy. People tend to be more empathic when they have been shown empathy therefore, by being empathic, a leader encourages team members to empathize with each other and to feel supported to speak up when they think the group is not being cooperative or effective in any way.

In addition to consistently demonstrating empathic behavior, a leader can encourage the team to take part in empathy exercises and define their empathic credo. Empathic behavior enables the forming of emotional bonds with the leader and other team members, which affects their sense of belonging and establishes a feeling of interconnectedness in the team. This can further help define the boundary of the team, thus strengthening team identity without the need to turn other teams into the enemy, developing more positive intergroup attitudes.¹⁷

Kouzes and Posner¹⁸ explain how powerful listening and empathy are for building trust in a team and further research¹⁹ has found that empathy in leadership does not only increase co-operation and a feeling of trust amongst team members but also supports task effectiveness. Researchers²⁰ argue that empathy can help task

¹⁶Gordon (2005).

¹⁷Dovidio et al. (2010).

¹⁸Kouzes and Posner (2011), Kouzes and Posner (2012).

¹⁹Humphrey 2002, Kellett et al. 2002, Kellett et al. 2006, Wolff et al 2002

²⁰Ibid.

effectiveness through building emotional bonds and creating a supportive environment. Through consistently exercising empathy, leaders become sensitive to job satisfaction levels and to taking actions that work for the team. Choi²¹ shows that charismatic leadership, comprises empathy, envisioning, and empowerment, is positively associated with high-task performance, mainly due to creating an environment of job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. For example, a team member might decide to disengage from the team goal due to feeling unappreciated. Developing empathy skills can help the leader (assigned in traditional teams, emergent leader in self-directed teams or team member in distributed leadership teams) be aware of the emotional withdrawal, be sensitive to the team member's perspective and respond appropriately by understanding and appreciating their work, make the team member's contribution known to other team members or higher up in the organization, and offer relevant rewards or offer alternative tasks where the person can thrive. This engagement, understanding, and response creates an emotional bond with the leader, makes the leader aware of the issues at hand and can potentially resolve the team member's concern, leading to job satisfaction and potentially motivation.

Empathic Work Design

Wolff et al.²² don't just see empathy as an enabler of job satisfaction but they reveal that empathy is needed for leaders to exhibit leadership behaviors, tasks, or relationships skilfully. There are numerous examples in business of leaders taking the initiative to change work structures in order to accommodate staff's needs. A CIPD report mentions the case of City Sightseeing Glasgow that, starting from a basis of understanding their people's needs, asks employees how many hours they would like to work each season and adjusts complex timetables accordingly. Although this started for employees over 40 who often needed to work reduced hours, it allowed students, women returning to the labor market and older workers to keep working and the company got recognized as an Age Positive Champion by the Department of Work and Pensions.²³

Many changes in the ways work is organized are prompted by empathic leadership. In many cases, these changes were first triggered by empathy and the business case followed. There are examples where empathic leadership in organizations elicited the adoption of flexible working, work life balance, integration of disabled people, and designing humane workplaces (i.e., a Gensler study²⁴ suggests that British business could be losing up to £135 billion each year from poorly designed offices.) initiatives. For example, Group Chief Executive of Glugston Group

²¹ Choi (2006).

²² Wolff et al. (2002).

²³ Department for Work and Pensions (2013), Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce (2010)

²⁴ Gensler (2005).

Stephen Martin took part in the UK Channel 4 TV series “Undercover Boss” in 2009. He worked as a construction worker, listened to his colleagues, experienced the main issues first hand, and faced the results of executive decisions himself. After this experience, Stephen and his team introduced a series of skills transfer initiatives to retain experienced workers and develop less experienced including training with provision of qualifications, open succession management discussions and a mentoring program.²⁵ Putting leaders in empathic situations as such or developing empathic skills can enhance task performance and strengthen problem-solving skills.

Empathic Self-Directed Teams

Research in self-directed teams shows that emergent team leaders tend to be the most empathic individuals, due to their ability to understand and address emotional needs of fellow team members.²⁶ Empathic leaders sense the emotions of the team and are compelled to act accordingly which can in turn enhance support, cohesion, and team participation.

I had the privilege to see empathic leadership in action observing a board meeting of an educational organization in the UK. Directors and affiliates arranged their chairs in a circle and started by meditating on the outcome of the meeting. They then started discussing their projects, the challenges they faced, what was going well, and what wasn't going so well. The discussion seemed honest and every person was speaking without trying to project a highly effective persona—as happens in most board meetings I have observed. As an observer (I was asked to sit in the circle with everyone and was encouraged to participate), I could not distinguish who was a director and who an affiliate. There did not seem to be any hierarchy amongst members. Whenever each member discussed their projects, other team members listened carefully and demonstrated empathy by offering understanding, sharing similar experiences and possible solutions. More often, other team members offered to assist the person asking for guidance with spending time to coach them or to work on their project (this, I found out later, would not include any extra fees or any other tangible reward for the person helping). The whole meeting occurred in an environment of support, equality and emotional understanding that I haven't encountered before in any observation. In this self-directed team, most of the team members were competent in empathic skills but, one of the directors emerged as a leader due to having longer experience in projects as well as his ability to offer the bigger picture while keeping the team in line with the overall direction of the organization.

²⁵Department for Work and Pensions (2013).

²⁶Bell and Hall (1954), Mayer and Geher (1996), Gough (1987).

Empathy in Diverse Workplaces

In today's increasingly diverse workplaces, empathy is becoming very important for practically everyone! Leaders working in global organizations, members of diverse teams and almost anyone who works across cultural, gender, racial boundaries. This is because empathy transcends behavioral, circumstantial, cultural, or linguistic barriers allowing a responsive interconnectedness. Goleman et al.²⁷ say that empathy makes resonance possible whereas the lack of it creates dissonance.

In diverse workplaces, it is important to engage in conscious empathic leadership in order to surpass our own assumptions, avoid our tendency to empathize more easily with those similar to ourselves²⁸ and understand others' perspectives. In response, people tend to connect and discuss with a more positive predisposition when they know others are consciously empathizing. This does not mean that there will be no power dynamics, conflicting views, or tensions in the workplace but, that the ways of resolving them can be more inclusive and fair. Empathic leadership in diverse teams also means to allow leaders from diverse backgrounds to adopt leadership roles in traditional, shared, distributed, or co-created ways.

Empathy For Everyone?

Kohut said that Empathy is a process that can lead us to both accurate and inaccurate results²⁹ and one of the main criticisms against empathy is that we empathize more easily with those closer to us. This criticism has a valid basis since our realities are mainly based on hierarchical and closed societies' perspectives. From this point of view, it would be both great and terrible to think of a society where we could empathize equally with our children and our enemy or with a victim and a predator. A way to address this is to consciously engage in empathy exercises in order to understand the feelings and perspectives of those in different life circumstances. The hope here is that our empathic abilities can develop and extend throughout our lives, distributed technology, and communication is making this easier offering us the opportunity to connect across geographical boundaries and cultural perspectives.

Developing Empathic Leadership

Empathy has come to the forefront of research lately with the discovery of mirror neurons in neurobiology. Mirror neurons are responsible for mimicry and allow us to sense the feelings of others directly. The same mirror neurons light up in our brain when we see someone acting in a certain way with intention as the mirror neurons

²⁷ Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002).

²⁸ Wade (2002), Madera et al. (2011)

²⁹ Kohut (1984), p. 485.

in their brain when they are performing this action and “send signals to emotional brain centers in the limbic system to make us feel what other people feel.”³⁰ The way we interpret these signals has to do with our background, experiences, biases, and the ability to regulate our bodily and emotional responses.

The discovery of mirror neurons led to the exploration and better understanding of the more complex system of empathy. Although there are still scientific tensions about the placing and function of mirror neurons, the importance of their discovery lies in that they have changed the way we think about ourselves. This goes in line with a stream of social scientists’ suggesting that we are not self-contained individuals but we are integrally connected to others and to our environment.

Rifkin³¹ suggests that an understanding of human nature as predisposed towards affection, sociability, and empathic extension will help us make the transition to homo empathicus which will revolutionize our ways of organizing work and society. Living in a reality of interconnectedness, Shamans throughout the ages have engaged in “shapeshifting,” a practice of adopting the form of an animal or a different person. Shamans shift their state of consciousness and get to “know” or “live” the reality of the animal or character they are adopting. To get to this state, they need to experience the world as one interconnected whole. In the same way, our understanding of the world as well as our approach towards empathy informs our ability to develop our empathic abilities. Schumann, et al. (2014) found that people who held the view that empathy can be developed, spent more effort developing their empathy and demonstrated enhanced empathic behaviors.

DeWaal³² opposes the dominant discourse that we are hardwired for competition showing that empathy is part of our evolution, innate to humans as in other mammals. He supports that it is not as a complex a skill as we have made it but that it is in our nature that we empathize from when we are born. He distinguishes three layers of empathy, the core one being an automated process of emotional contagion (our ability to be affected by emotional contagion, our bodily responsive understanding, the second being a concern for others, taking the form of sympathetic concern consolations (our ability to assess someone’s feelings and offer consolation) and finally the more sophisticated layer being perspective taking, mostly taking the form of targeted helping (our ability to purposefully adopt the perspective of another without losing our sense of self and offer help informed by what the other needs).

According to this view, emotional contagion is mostly involuntary but sympathetic concern and perspective taking are voluntary while the levels of empathy we can display vary between individuals. The lack of empathy in individuals can be ascribed to neural deficit³³ or to socialization. For example, Rifkin³⁴ mentions orphans in America before the 30s raised by new sanitary scientific methods and

³⁰ Iacoboni (2008), p. 119.

³¹ Rifkin (2010).

³² De Waal (2010).

³³ Sterzer et al (2007).

³⁴ Rifkin (2010) pp.19–20.

DeWaal mentions the example of a group of orphans raised according to scientific principles ignoring their emotional needs during Ceausescu's presidency in Romania. In both cases, the orphans were raised with plenty of food and medical care but without affection. In the first case, the orphans' mortality rate was much higher than children raised with biological or surrogate parents, and in the second case "The orphans were incapable of laughing or crying, spent the day rocking and clutching themselves in fetal position and didn't even know how to play. New toys were hurled against the wall."³⁵ Whatever the reason for lack of empathy, scientists find that there are ways to develop new neural pathways and cultivate aspects of empathy such as perspective taking.

Mary Gordon³⁶ developed Roots of Empathy (ROE), a revolutionary program aimed at promoting children's positive human qualities. It started in Canada and was later adopted in the USA, New Zealand, and the UK. In ROE, a baby is brought in the class and becomes the teacher! Children gather round it, discuss the baby's, their fellow students' and their own temperament, the baby's development, and the baby's relationship with its parent. Children in ROE classes showed significant reduction in bullying, proactive aggression, and social aggression.³⁷ Instead, they showed significant increase in caring, kindness, peer acceptance, emotion understanding, perspective taking, classroom supportiveness,³⁸ altruism, and pro-social value orientation.³⁹

For those of us who did not have the chance to attend an ROE class as children, researchers and practitioners suggest a variety of ways to develop empathy. These include participant observations, shadowing a client/patient/colleague,⁴⁰ on the job experiences (user empathy experiences, hospitalization experiences, or job swap types of experiences), role playing, theatrical performances,⁴¹ poetry,⁴² dance,⁴³ literature,⁴⁴ mindfulness, and loving kindness meditation.⁴⁵ These ways have sometimes been proven to be even more effective than just exposing someone to situations that would trigger empathy. For example, Shapiro and Rucker⁴⁶ find that showing a movie about a patient tends to be more emotionally moving, creating an emotional idealism than actually treating a patient with similar symptoms.

³⁵ De Waal (2010), p.13.

³⁶ Gordon (2005).

³⁷ Ibid p. 169 and p. 239.

³⁸ Ibid 253–256.

³⁹ Ibid p. 248.

⁴⁰ Martin (1993), Hojat (2009).

⁴¹ Hojat (2009).

⁴² Shapiro and Rucker (2003).

⁴³ Behrends et al. (2012).

⁴⁴ Martin 1993, Krznaric (2014).

⁴⁵ Shapiro et al. (1998).

⁴⁶ Shapiro and Rucker (2004).

In the world of business, the methods used are often the usual business training methods such as training for listening skills, coaching, and mentoring. If they are well designed, these methods are effective but, care should be taken to not turn empathy into another management technique. Stephen Covey⁴⁷ explains that empathic listening takes time to develop, and it is very different to active and reflective listening techniques, which involve mimicking the other, mainly with an intention to control and manipulate. Empathic listening is a sophisticated skill based on the intention to fully understand a person emotionally and intellectually. But similarly to the ROE program aiming at developing empathy early on, the business world is starting to develop empathic leadership qualities in business schools⁴⁸. In Holt and Marques⁴⁹ survey, business students ranked empathy the lowest amongst a list of skills needed for leadership, but their views changed after increasing awareness. The authors call for business schools, as the places where future leaders are educated, to work towards increasing awareness amongst students on the importance of empathy in leadership.

Notably, management practices aimed at corporate recovery or profit making might enhance empathy as a consequence. Executives immersing in working on the front line⁵⁰ or using empathy maps to understand customer's needs, seem to resurface with increased understanding that might reach high levels of empathy. For example, Food Retailer Tesco's Chief Executive Dave Lewis took his top executives in a self-catering flat and asked them to shop and cook like housewives to "put them back in touch with their customers." He also asked thousands of head office staff to spend one day a fortnight for a few months in a store.⁵¹

It is not certain whether these exercises result in increased levels of empathy for customers or colleagues in the front line but they have the capacity to do so. The risk here is the use of empathy for getting into consumers' minds with the intention to manipulate them. Advertising has been consistently using similar techniques to influence consumers. However, to empathize, means having an understanding of unity and interconnectedness. A person, truly sensing others' feelings and point of view, sees others' perspective within themselves and can therefore respond from this understanding. It is what Shotter calls "witness thinking."⁵² The opposite would just be appraising others' perspective in a cognitive way; it would not be empathy. The issue here is complicated, we need to ask: Is this really empathy? If it is, what are the risks of training marketing and sales people on empathy techniques? Is there hope in the exercise of empathy in design thinking?

⁴⁷ Covey (1989).

⁴⁸ Rifkin 2010, p. 545 mentions Columbia University Business School introducing social intelligence pedagogy into its MBA curriculum and other universities have similar programs.

⁴⁹ Holt and Marques (2012).

⁵⁰ Through structured company initiatives, their own decision or their participation in TV series such as "boss swap" or "back to the floor."

⁵¹ Craven (2014).

⁵² Shotter (2005)

Design Thinking

Empathy in work organizations and especially in “design thinking” has come to also acquire a meaning of deliberately creating empathic experiences by putting oneself in the position of the end user and imagine their feelings, thoughts, and needs in order to design suitable solutions. Design Company IDEO offers empathic artifacts, stories, and experiences to their clients, helping them understand their end users and change their organizational culture to maintain empathy. For this, designers and clients immerse in the user’s experience by living in similar conditions (i.e., IDEO asked 35 employees of a pharmaceutical company take on a patient’s profile and “live” for a month like them taking mock injections and documenting their experiences in order to understand the pain points of a weekly injectable drug⁵³) or experience specifically constructed analogous experiences (i.e., IDEO simulating the conditions of a restaurant where customers would eat in the kitchen and the food would be delayed without explanation to allow hospital employees understand their patient’s experience⁵⁴).



From a workshop with Jane Fulton Suri from IDEO 2002: exploring ways to create empathy with blind people (IK’s World Trip 2002)

This approach to work design leads to innovative, effective solutions and often to social innovation but care should be taken that it doesn’t become another cognitive exercise or business fad. The risk is that these exercises on empathy can be used in “superficial, patronizing, and inauthentic”⁵⁵ ways if they are not well designed or designed with the intention to acquire power rather than understanding. It is not clear yet if this explosion of empathy in the field of working organizations enhances our collective ability to empathize. It is also not very clear whether the products and services designed are addressing a valid need or just creating new needs. This does not suggest we should abandon deliberate exercises on empathy in business but rather, as with any kind of knowledge, to tread carefully while clarifying the moral dimensions.

⁵³ Battarbee et al. (2014)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ New and Kimbell (2013), pp. 144–145.

Empathic leadership is not a technique to be learnt or an initiative to apply to organizations but develops out of new ways of understanding organizations and out of living experience.

Case Study 11.1: Empathy and Leadership Life Story— The controversial case of Camila Batmanghelidjh

Camila Batmanghelidjh, the founder and director of Kids Company (www.kidsco.org.uk), one of the UKs most prominent children charities calls for the prime minister to imagine the lives of abused children⁵⁶ and talks of the power of compassion to transform lives according to higher principles.⁵⁷

She ascribes the development of her empathy to nearly dying as a baby. She says: “I was born two and a half months premature, they didn’t put me in an incubator because they thought I would die, so they just sent me home. Because of that I suffered slight brain damage, for example my visual processing. I still can’t type or drive and I couldn’t read until I was 12. In some ways, I was very disabled but I had this sense of otherness and spirituality. I am very practical and pragmatic, but I believe in a different kind of order. There are patterns in the world and in people’s behavior. When I was nine, I asked my mum why we didn’t have any books in the library on other people’s emotions. I was a different kind of kid, but my family never tried to change me. My mum gave me a calm confidence and helped me stay true to who I was. I had a notion that people were different and this was my difference.”⁵⁸



(continued)

⁵⁶ Batmanghelidjh (2012).

⁵⁷ Batmanghelidjh (2010).

⁵⁸ Alexander (2015).

(continued)

Camila Batmanghelidjh (*right*) plenary questions with Sarah Montague at the NHS Confederation Conference 2001 (NHS Confederation 2001)

Her empathy seems to also have developed as a result of a variety of tensions she experienced throughout her life. She was born in Iran to an affluent family but, her father was imprisoned during the Iranian revolution because of his links to the previous regime, and she was left without income and having to work from the age of 14 to pay her school fees. Her role models were her two grandfathers: “My grandfather was a graceful, beautiful man who worked as a pediatrician and I felt that he had something spiritual about him. I was convinced that that spirituality was because he had taken up a vocation and I wanted some of that. Then my other grandfather was self-made multi-millionaire who’d his first million by the age of 22. He had this real get up and go to him. I have both elements in my life and am a fusion of the two.”⁵⁹

Diagnosed with severe dyslexia, she rebelled against the school system putting her in the lowest sets of students and considering her as “thick.”⁶⁰ She says “Reading was hard, directions too, stairs flatten out and even now, I can’t use a keyboard at all.”⁶¹

Trained as a psychotherapist she became disillusioned with government service programs failing to address the needs of children facing neglect or abuse. At 24 she founded her first charity “Place 2Be” based in a broom cupboard in a primary school. In 1996, she founded Kids Company to provide emotional and practical support to vulnerable children and young people.

Often called the “Angel of Peckham” she devoted her life to helping children. Because of her empathic abilities she was able to feel every child’s needs as well as what was needed in a larger scale to help children and young people. She had to re-mortgage her house twice to fund the charity and managed to enlist a number of celebrity donors such as rock band Coldplay, artist Damien Hirst and author JK Rowling. To keep working with 36000 children, the charity needs to raise £24m a year. In terms of service, the charity has 361 full-time staff and 11000 volunteers. She says that her nonconventional approach to hiring staff is that she is “interested in people with the ability to love.”⁶²

Camila Batmanghelidjh prides herself in focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable without making compromises in order to comply with government

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⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Monks (2009).

⁶² Alexander (2015).

(continued)

priorities and current trends. She works 18 h a day so that “No child who knocks on her door can be allowed to slip through the net.”

Despite receiving an honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), numerous awards (including Ernst and Young’s Social Entrepreneur of the Year award 2005), honorary degrees, and doctorates and being named as one of the 100 most powerful women in the UK by [Woman’s Hour](#) on [BBC Radio 4](#), she insists she does not have any power: “I’m a custodian of other people’s power. All I’ve done is galvanize the 600 staff, the 11,000 volunteers, the thousands of supporters, the companies who volunteer with us and communities who come together around these kids.”⁶³

Orr⁶⁴ in 2009 wrote that ‘The 15 independent evaluations Kids Company has been subjected to since 2000 – featuring such astounding statistics as “96 per cent return rate to education and employment for children who were otherwise disengaged” or “impact on crime reduction 88 per cent” – suggest that the charity does its work with wonderful efficiency.’

However, in August 2015, Kids Company collapsed under allegations including financial mismanagement and unorthodox methods. The stories that came out offered a very different image to that shown in the media before and an MP’s report concluded that the charity’s collapse was caused by an ‘extraordinary catalogue of failure in governance and control at every level. The trustees were described as negligent’⁶⁵.

Kids Company, built and running on empathic motives, collapsed in a scandal of misuse of public funds. Camilla Batmanghelidjh admitted in a TV documentary that she would ‘slightly break’ the law if it was to the interest of the children. To this we have to ask: where is the balance between empathy and governance in organisations?

Discussion

1. How has Camila Batmanghelidjh’s work and the empathetic idea behind the organisation influenced: children in need and the wider communities that Kids Company operated in? Kids Company as an organisation? Her own influence and leadership?
2. In which ways has the collapse of Kids Company affected the charity sector and what can organisations learn from it? How can an organisation maintain strong governance systems while remaining true to its empathetic cause?

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⁶³ Saner (2013).

⁶⁴ Orr (2009).

⁶⁵ Woman’s Hour (2016).

(continued)

3. Think you are a children's charity leader for a day. How would your day start? Who would you see first at work? Who are the children that come to you for help? How do you feel about being or not being able to help them? How can you empathize with them? How can you demonstrate compassion? Can you offer your undivided attention to the children while facing funding and policy pressures? How can you stay a strong leader with integrity in your field?

Discussion Questions

1. Empathic leadership is still in the stage of development as a construct. How would it apply in the work of (a) a researcher, (b) a training practitioner, (c) a business leader?
2. What is the business case for empathic leadership? Discuss.
3. Think and feel about the perspectives of other people in your class. Start with your closest friend, what are they feeling? What are they expecting from this class? Similarly, take on the perspective of the most highly motivated student in the class, and the most indifferent student. How about your least favorite fellow student? And your tutor?

Extend this exercise to people you encounter everyday but don't create connections with, the person you buy your coffee/tea from, an old person living in a care home, and the homeless person you pass by in the street. (To extend this exercise further, you can "shapeshift" into a homeless person for a few hours. What are people's reactions to you? How do you see the world from this perspective?)

4. The main criticisms against empathy is that we are predisposed to empathize with those close to us and that empathy can be used to get into consumers heads and manipulate them. What would you do to address these issues in organizations?
5. Discuss different ways in which empathic leadership can be developed. What should be the theoretical basis of empathic leadership development? What are the main risks?

Chapter Summary

In a fast paced, diverse, technologically connected and flexibly structured business environment, we are called to redefine our stories about leadership. Empathic leadership is based on an understanding that we are all connected, values leadership as interrelationship and opens the way for distributed, shared, and co-creative leadership perspectives.

Empathy is a complex process combining affective, cognitive, and communication components. It is the process of sensing the others' emotions from their perspective and responding appropriately without losing one's sense of self.

Empathic leaders are competent in creating emotional bonds within their team, covering needs of affiliation, increasing collaboration, enhancing the adoption of a common goal, and potentially retaining talent.

Empathic leaders are more responsive to job satisfaction and motivation needs and can therefore achieve higher task effectiveness. Moreover, they are perceived as more effective by team members.

Research shows that empathic people emerge as leaders in teams and are more easily accepted by other team members. With empathic skills, they can understand the needs of the team, respond appropriately, and guide the team more effectively towards a common direction.

Empathic leadership is important for diversity due to its potential to transcend behavioral, circumstantial, cultural and linguistic barriers.

Empathic leadership can be developed, organizations are consciously working on empathizing with customers or end users, and a few business schools are making progress in including empathy development in the curriculum.

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