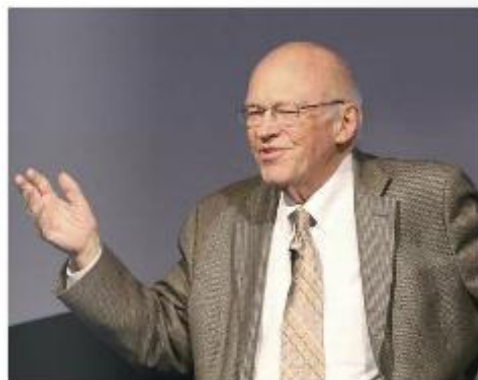


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Ken Blanchard

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Leaders Are Made,
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The Power of **EMPATHY** in the Workplace

BY BOB ROSEN AND TONY RUTIGLIANO

A few years ago, the leaders of a pharmaceutical company approached us about, as they put it, rejuvenating their workforce.

This company had seen massive changes in its marketplace and in the regulations governing its go-to-market practices. Although it was on the verge of introducing several new drugs, the company had suffered through a few rough years during which repeated layoffs resulted in a 40% drop in the employee population. This once-great organization was mired in self-doubt, despite the hope kindled by the new products that would soon be ready for market.

In talking to scores of its employees, we discovered that the company had many of the right leaders in place. These executives were full of passion, savvy, and drive. However, many of the frontline employees were cynical long-termers waiting to take the company up on the next offer of a buyout. Worse still, middle managers showed themselves to be the least engaged and most frustrated slice of the population. They reported being squeezed by executives who, they felt, wanted them to do more with less and by line workers who wanted more answers and assurance than the managers could provide.

The president of the organization, who'd had the unenviable job of managing this decline, at first scoffed at our findings. How could managers say they were ill-equipped to deal with change? How could so many employees feel adrift and uncertain when he and his team had been so clear about where the organization was headed? He pointed to all the communication and messaging that he believed should have helped managers and their teams cope with the disruption.

This well-intentioned executive had made a common mistake: He equated "messaging" with "communication." Many people fail to see the difference between talking to and talking with, and they provide facts while ignoring feelings. We've come across few executives smarter than this president. His quandary only served to remind us of the validity of a tried-and-true business adage: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." In short, the employees of this pharma company wanted their leader to act, think, and feel. In particular, they wanted to know that he felt their pain.

What is this thing called "empathy" that many consider the softest of the "soft skills"? Empathy is a deep understanding, on an emotional and cognitive level, of the fears, frustrations, aspirations, and concerns of people. The actions we take as a result of that understanding are evidence of our empathy. These actions communicate that we care.

In his *Harvard Business Review* article, "Leadership in a Combat Zone," Lieutenant General William Pagonis, who served as director of logistics during the Gulf War, wrote:

Owning the facts is a prerequisite to leadership. But there are millions of technocrats out there with lots of facts in their quivers and little leadership potential. In many cases, what they are missing is empathy. No one is a leader who can't put himself or herself in the other person's shoes.

So much for empathy being a "soft skill." Why should you care about empathy? How can you develop it? And how can it affect your style of leadership?

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

A new field of study called "neuroleadership" has emerged from the combined fields of neuroscience and leadership development. It may sound like an odd marriage, but as Pagonis's comment suggests, there is much about the brain's activities that contributes to a person's success or failure as a leader. Evidence indicates that leaders who are adept at reading other people's moods and connecting on an emotional level also can stimulate feelings of shared bonds in those around them. They create a true meeting of the minds.

Hard science tells us that our brains are built to seek out connections with others. Consider, for example, the mirror neurons and spindle cells found in most regions of the brain. Discoveries about the functions of mirror neurons and spindle cells are helping to explain the neurological basis of certain emotions that are vital to leadership. Italian researchers first identified mirror neurons when they observed monkeys. They discovered that when one monkey watched another move its arm, the same area in both animals' brains became active. The researchers initially thought that mirror neurons enable us to experience sensations involved with movement when we watch someone else move.

Researchers now believe, however, that these neurons also enable us to share certain emotions. For instance, when you see someone in the dentist's chair about to get a tooth drilled, you may wince in pain at the sight. This "shared pain" is triggered by your mirror neurons. Even more remarkable, scientists have noted a rich presence of mirror neurons in the brain's insula, a key structure in generating empathy. The insula is very involved in emotions such as happiness (especially pleasure and reward) and disgust.



“Good communication is a conscious choice: Deep listening to

others—without interrupting and without preparing a comeback—is a great gift you give to yourself and others.”

Mirror neurons also may be involved in feelings of happiness. These neurons become especially active when you laugh or smile and make others react the same way. This may explain why lighthearted, upbeat feelings and laughter often are contagious. As a leader, surely you have noticed that when you are happy and joking around with others, they also lighten up and join in.

Furthermore, when we act on feelings of empathy—engaging others because we “know” what they are feeling—we create a neurochemical loop between our emotions and behavior in which they reinforce each other. This reinforcement further enables us to stimulate positive feelings in those around us so that everyone is more eager to work together to create something good.

Spindle cells also appear to be instrumental in making us socially adroit leaders. They fire more quickly than other types of neurons and are believed to send signals throughout the brain about our social emotions. A study involving how people react to a performance evaluation shows how this works. One group of people received a negative evaluation, but it was delivered with positive emotions such as smiles and nods. A second group got positive evaluations, but the feedback was conveyed with frowns and stern expressions. In interviews with participants receiving the interviews, those who received the positive signals with the negative evaluation felt better about themselves and presumably performed better afterward. The tenor of the emotions, rather than the substance of the evaluation, made the difference in people’s attitudes toward work.

Imagine a real-life company full of positive mirror neurons and spindle cells in action. Why wouldn’t companies seek to unleash such a force? Here’s a case in point:

“As a child my nickname was Smiley,” said an executive we’ll call Phil. “Although I’ve always been a socially anxious guy, I learned early on that I smiled out of social discomfort.” Phil grew up in Appalachia, a poor mountain area in the eastern United States. With “average intelligence” and “never having taken a business course,” Phil became one of the most successful CEOs in the pharmaceutical management business. Under his leadership, a company of several thousand employees competed against industry giants and became one of the most predictable performers on the Nasdaq stock exchange for more than 10 years.

Over time, Phil became what his smile represented—optimistic, confident, and affable. And it was the power of his smile that made the difference. The smile not only helped him to manage his social anxiety but also was infectious to everyone around him. “My smile communicated optimism and a can-do spirit. I hired people who smiled, and together we created the most friendly, positive, empowered culture that differentiated us from our competition. No matter how negative or tense a situation became, our smiles—inside and out—gave us this special sense of hope and confidence, and everything seemed to work out at the end.”

Whether we know it or not, we are all connected by our mirror neurons. As a result, a simple smile can go a long way.

TELL ‘EM YOU CARE

You could be the most empathetic manager or leader around, but it will do little good unless others know it. You’ve got to show employees that you care.

One research organization described an empathetic leader as one who is:

- ▶ Sensitive to signs of overwork in others
- ▶ Interested in others’ needs, hopes, and dreams
- ▶ Willing to help employees with personal problems
- ▶ Compassionate when someone discloses a personal loss



Additionally, one might well argue that the social skill at the heart of healthy leadership is conscious, clear, and courageous communication. You must express in your words and deeds an understanding of what others are trying to communicate as well.

Good communication is a conscious choice: Deep listening to others—without interrupting and without preparing a comeback—is a great gift you give to yourself and others.

Good communication is clear: You know exactly what you want to express, and based on the information you receive through careful listening, you must be ready to pursue a variety of tributaries to reach mutual understanding.

Good communication is courageous: It is honest, straightforward, and true to how you perceive the world. It is also about being courageous enough to let others own their views of the truth. An individual’s truth might be fundamentally different from your own, and it may be fundamentally flawed. But others have the right to their truths, and it is your responsibility to listen. The goal is for everyone to be heard and respected.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you think about becoming a more empathetic leader:

- ▶ Do you know what the people on your team are afraid of? Do you know what they are talking about when you’re not in the room?
- ▶ Do people pick up on your moods, and do you pick up on theirs?
- ▶ Do your meetings allow for people to discuss how they feel about things?

The leader who viscerally understands what other people are feeling and experiencing is someone others want to follow. These leaders attract talent, and people are loyal to them. Being empathetic is not always easy. You may need to work hard to understand someone who is fundamentally different from you, confront negative feelings you have about that person, or address your fear that your empathy will send false signals. The secret is to understand what is influencing your reactions. Work hard to put yourself in the other’s shoes and interact with her as a whole person. It’s amazing how good you will feel. *MW*

Bob Rosen and Tony Rutigliano are the CEO and president, respectively, of Healthy Companies, which works with leaders and managers at Global 2000 corporations on building and sustaining productive relationships with their boards, each other, and employees. Learn more at www.healthycompanies.com

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