CHAPTER 10

Engaging with Empathy

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"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." —Maya Angelou

INTRODUCTION

Empathy plays a critical role in interpersonal communication by helping to bring us together, a task that is particularly important as we face interpersonal as well as global crises. These challenges offer no easy solutions and require us to connect with and understand each other. **Empathy**, defined as sensing and imagining the feelings of others, is at the core of connection. While empathy is a powerful aspect of relationships, it can be challenging to engage with well. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to engage you, the reader, in the process of understanding, developing, and applying empathy.

Chapter Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to...

- define empathy.
- describe the difference between empathy and sympathy.
- identify and apply the three types of empathy.
- describe the benefits and potential pitfalls of empathy.

- identify ways to increase empathy.

KEYWORDS: Empathy, perspective-taking, compassion, understanding, cognitive empathy, affective empathy

This chapter starts by defining empathy and distinguishing empathy from sympathy. Then, we discuss the three types of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathic concern. After talking through various definitions of empathy, we share the positive effects of empathy and the potential challenges of empathy. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion on the four attributes of empathy and how empathy can be developed.

Defining Empathy

Empathy is the uniquely human ability to focus on another person's internal state. While the word "empathy" can be used to describe a wide array of experiences, empathy in the context of interpersonal relationships is often defined as "the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling" ("Empathy Defined," n.d., para. 1).

To further understand empathy, it is helpful to distinguish it from sympathy. While sympathy involves understanding from our own perspective, empathy involves taking the perspective of the other person, sharing their emotion, and exhibiting concern. Sympathy involves feeling *for* someone else. Empathy pushes us to feel *with* someone else. Sympathy is surface-level connection, while empathy is deeper and more intense. In sum, "empathy fuels connection, sympathy drives disconnection" (Brown, 2013, 0:15). When faced with someone else's pain, sympathy maintains distance from the other person's emotions by, for example, finding the bright side of a situation or changing the subject. Sympathy might motivate us to express sorrow or send a card, actions that are often appreciated (Bariso, 2018). Empathy, however, takes more time and effort by moving us to connect with the other person's emotions, drawing from feelings we have previously felt. Given that empathy can recall uncomfortable and difficult feelings, empathy can be a difficult and vulnerable choice.

Consider this example: You had a misunderstanding with a roommate and left your dorm room. Later you are sitting in a corner booth in the union. You overhear a person who sounds like your roommate talking to someone about how terrible they felt about the disagreement with their roommate (i.e., you) and how they wish they would have taken time after hearing the news of a sick family member to go for a walk. Your roommate shares that a walk would have allowed them to clear their head and avoid projecting their sadness over the sickness of a family member onto their roommate (i.e., you). When you hear this, you recall a similar feeling from your own life in which your grandma was sick, and it was difficult for you to talk about. Connecting a previously experienced emotion to your roommate's current feelings allows you to gain a level of understanding and connection with your roommate, enabling you to understand their perspective (and reaction) and share in the emotional burden. In response to understanding your roommate's emotions, you decide to act and check in with them, eventually leading you to volunteer to help them study, run errands, or think through contacting their professors.

The example above illustrates three different types of empathy (Goleman et al., 2017). First, cognitive empathy is understanding someone else's perspective. Cognitive empathy can also be referred to as perspective-taking (Goleman, 2008), which can help in motivating people. However, cognitive empathy without the other types of empathy can be used to hurt people by understanding other people's emotions and using them to wound or

manipulate; therefore, we also need emotional empathy, the second type of empathy. Emotional empathy is feeling what another person feels. In other words, emotional empathy can spread emotions as if they were contagious. The potential downside of emotional empathy is that we may feel other people's emotions so strongly that it could hinder our ability to be of help (Goleman, 2008). This leads us to the third type of empathy, empathic concern, which is defined as sensing what someone else needs from you. Empathic concern, also referred to as compassionate empathy, is what motivates us to act and help.

Discovering the Effects of Empathy

Researchers in a variety of fields have identified numerous benefits of empathy. In healthcare, empathy by care providers (e.g., doctors and nurses) has been shown to increase patient satisfaction following a course of treatment and reduce stress (Riess, 2015). Additionally, providers themselves benefit from empathy because it enhances job satisfaction, belief that their work is meaningful, and overall well-being (Riess, 2015). In the customer service industry, empathy reduces conflict and enhances customer satisfaction (Clark et al., 2013). Further, empathetic workplaces typically have stronger collaboration, less stress, and greater morale (Zaki, 2020). Additionally, employees bounce back from challenging circumstances faster.

While the benefits of empathy are significant, scholars have argued that too much empathy can be harmful. Paul Bloom (2016), a psychology professor at Yale University, has discussed the potential downsides of empathy. Specifically, Bloom (2016) argued that too much empathy for a person or group might result in an inability to be rational. The lack of rationality could lead to us being too closely aligned with the person or group for whom we have empathy and result in a bias towards outsiders. For example, if one of our friends gets into a fight with another friend, we may empathize with one friend's perspective, making it difficult for us to see another perspective.

Rather than empathy, Bloom (2016) argues for rational compassion. Rational compassion encourages people to utilize rational thinking (e.g., cost-benefit analysis) to decide what is the right thing to do and then to utilize compassion to motivate yourself to follow through on doing the right thing. An additional limitation of empathy is that we can become so consumed in what other people are feeling and experiencing that we are emotionally overwhelmed, an experience to which people in caregiving professions can be particularly susceptible. What do these potential pitfalls of empathy teach us? Empathy is necessary for interpersonal relationships, allowing us to understand the feelings and experiences of others; however, empathy is not a cure-all solution for the cultural challenges we face. By understanding the potential limitations of empathy, as well as the numerous strengths of empathy, we can more effectively utilize it to build relationships and foster understanding.

 Developing Empathy

As we start to consider how empathy can be developed, let's look at the four defining attributes of empathy (Wiseman, 1996). First, empathy allows us to see the world as others see it. While we will never be able to put ourselves fully into the shoes of another perspective, we can work to take on their perspectives. Second, empathy is non-judgmental. If we are going to connect empathetically with others, we must leave judgment at the door. As we give up judgment of others, we are also able to give up judgment of ourselves. Third, empathy allows us to understand another person's current emotions. Fourth, empathy should also result in us communicating our understanding of the person's feelings. Naming emotions helps us make sure that we understand the other person correctly. At times, communicating other people's feelings means that we might get the emotion wrong. When this happens, it gives the other person the opportunity to share what they are truly feeling.

Specific practices that can help us move through Wiseman's (1996) attributes of empathy include the following:

- Active listening: paying close attention to what the other person is saying and focusing on understanding their experiences

- Practice mindfulness: be aware of what is going on around you, including the behaviors and expressions of people. Practicing mindfulness has been shown to help us with perspective-taking while also preventing us from becoming overwhelmed by others' negative emotions (Birnie et al., 2010)

- Demonstrate empathetic body language: empathy extends beyond what we say to our facial expressions, eye contact, and posture

- Meditate: neuroscience research shows that meditation, specifically meditation focused on concern for others, can increase empathy (Lutz et al., 2008)

Summary

As we honor the experiences of ourselves and others, empathy is a critical component to understanding experiences and fostering connection. Empathy allows us to connect with ourselves and our emotions, thereby contributing to the consciousness of self-value within the Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). Further, empathy significantly contributes to the three group values in the SCM: collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility. Notably, the working ensemble of the Higher Education Research Institute, the scholars behind SCM, identify empathy as one of the values underlying effective group functioning. Specifically, they write,

Keeping an open mind and cultivating the ability to be empathic are vital to building collaborative relationships. Without openness and empathy, individuals can become too easily focused on their own ideas and perspectives. Letting themselves 'walk in other people's shoes' creates further opportunities for enhancing self-knowledge. (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996, p. 50)

In sum, empathy connects us with our own emotions, as well as the feelings and experiences of others, and promotes a positive and productive group and work environment.

QUESTIONS FOR JOURNALING OR DISCUSSION

- Reflect on the four attributes of empathy as defined and articulated by Wiseman (1996). Which of these four attributes is the most important to you and why? When has someone shown you this attribute of empathy? How have you extended this attribute of empathy to someone else? What are additional opportunities in the future where you might extend this attribute of empathy?

- Consider what it is like when you feel that someone really understands you. What do they do? How do you know they understand you? Ask a handful of friends and/or classmates the same questions, and then compare their responses to your own. Do they experience empathy in the same ways as you? What is similar? What is different? How might what you observed influence how you engage empathetically with others?

- We often talk about empathy within the context of something difficult happening to ourselves or to a friend; however, empathy also occurs during moments of joy, excitement, jealousy, frustration, etc. How might empathy look different depending on the emotion the other person is experiencing? Which situations or emotions are the

most challenging for you to engage with empathetically?

• Look through the list of practices for increasing empathy above. Which of these strategies would you be interested in trying? Implement this practice for four days and monitor how it impacts your conversations and relationships, as well as yourself.

ACTIVITIES

"Walk With Me" Case Study

Empathy is a core value in leadership that provides us with opportunities to make connections. As we engage in social change, an awareness of how those around us perceive a situation is critical. The following activity is designed to frame empathy in leadership from a Social Change Model perspective.

Walk With Me – I Do Not Need You to Feel Sorry for Me

There is an opportunity for students to assist a local coalition of non-profit centers that serves people who are experiencing homelessness. While there tends to be a large outpouring of support during the winter months, there is a significant need for supplies during the summer months as well. Let's look at this from the story of one person in particular, Bruno. Bruno is a single man who experienced a series of setbacks in life, along with a handful of tough choices. The events took Bruno down a slow spiral, and Bruno had little access to outside resources that may have helped. He came home to his apartment one day and found the eviction notice. Bruno had lost his home and shelter. While he has a place in a local park where he prefers to rest during the warm months, he struggles with insect bites. In a local shelter, Bruno became a vocal advocate for people who lack shelter. He repeatedly reminds staff about the need for bug spray. One day, the center director asks Bruno to share his story on video to explain the need. He hesitated to make the video and replied, "Just walk with me one day to see, experience, and feel the welts from all my bites. I don't need you to feel sorry for me." At that critical point, the director was humbled and reflected upon the original request. Bruno's words never left her, and she continues to utilize them when giving presentations for donations and support: "Walk With Me."

Activity: Break into small groups and identify the types of empathy in this story. Then, discuss ways in which your team might assist with this need (among others).

Questions to consider:

1. How do you determine the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness?

2. What feelings, thoughts, or emotions emerge as you imagine yourself helping people experiencing homelessness?

3. What judgments do we often make about people who are experiencing homelessness? How might this affect your decisions as a leader?

4. Your "job" is to walk by the side of the people experiencing homelessness. How will you support their needs and resist any urge to "fix them" or, as Bruno stated, "not feel sorry for anyone"?

5. How does what we discussed about empathy throughout this chapter apply to the case study? If you were the director of the center, what would you be able to learn from the chapter?

   1. What might be a sympathetic response for the director? What would be an empathetic response?

Active Listening Activity

- Split up students into groups of 2-3
- Rotate turns as sharer, listener, and observer
- The sharer will spend three minutes sharing about something significant to them this semester (something especially difficult, encouraging, etc.). The listener will focus on demonstrating active and empathetic listening. The observer will take notes on empathetic listening behaviors and non-empathetic listening behaviors.
- Debrief key takeaways (e.g., which role was the most difficult for you? Which role was the easiest? Why?)

Empathy and Service-Learning

- If your class is engaging in a service-learning project, discuss how your service-learning project has impacted your capacity for empathy. If your class is not engaging in service-learning, discuss the below questions in light of other interactions with family, friends, community members, classmates, younger students, etc.
- When have you observed the emotional experience of others at your service-learning site?
- How did you respond to observing others' emotional experiences?
- When do you show empathy? When did you show sympathy? If you were placed in this situation again, how would you

respond differently?

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