EMPATHY IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This paper provides discussion from multiple recent articles on the topic of empathy. The main question for research is asks “what are the benefits of having empathetic leadership in organizations?” To answer the question the paper first discussion definitions for empathy and empathetic leadership and then researches the importance of empathy as a leadership trait. This research shows that empathy is among the top four of 20 traits in one study, twice as important as cognitive traits in another study, and significantly important to military units and high reliability organizations. The paper then researches the heart of the question which is exploring the benefits an organization has from having empathetic leaders or an empathic climate, which are abundant, but stem from the open communication and relationship that empathy pairs itself too. The final research asks if empathy can be developed in leaders that do not have empathy leadership trait. Findings were that leaders could develop with a desire too with the biggest challenge to take on being empathetic listening.
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Empathy in Organizations

Leaders commonly are expected to have vision, mental toughness, courage, and great knowledge but recent research is also adding that empathy, and having leaders that are empathetic, are critical elements to establishing an effective organization. Empathy simply can be defined as placing yourself in another’s position, and feeling what they feel. Deeper than that definition, and the understanding for this paper is that empathy is “entering into the private perceptual world of another and becoming thoroughly at home with it…without prejudice” (Garner, 2009, p. 85). In this way, empathy helps creates relationships, trust, and connections and allows leaders emotional insight to make decisions in the work place (p. 85).

This paper reviews several articles and journals with the aim of answering the question “what are the benefits of having empathetic leadership in organizations?”. The paper first reviews thoughts of how empathy, as a leader trait, is perceived in importance in organizations and how organizations are adapting to fit empathy into their leadership models. The paper then discusses the benefits of having empathetic leadership in organizations. Finally, the paper reviews how organizations can develop empathy as a skill in leaders. The importance of this review brings to light how important empathetic leaders can be to recognizing and building an effective organization beginning with establishing relationships and trust.

Empathy as a Critical Leadership Attribute

Where does empathy, perhaps an un-business like term, stack in terms of most important traits for leaders that results in organizations being the most effective? Interviewing senior management at 188 companies, including large and global corporations, psychologists determined that intelligence and visionary thinking were important but the concept of “emotional
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intelligence proved to be twice as important as the others [traits] for jobs at all levels” and it is increasingly important at the highest levels of an organization (Goleman, 2004, p. 2). Goleman (2004) describes emotional intelligence to include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill of which empathy was most recognizable and defined as “thoughtfully considering employee’s feelings…in the process of making intelligent decisions” (p. 7). In the same research Goleman notes that there was comparing average performers to star performers, there was a 90% difference directly attributable to emotional intelligence factors (p. 2). A glaring statistic supporting that those with higher emotional intelligence, that includes empathy, leads to higher performance and effectiveness.

In a second research study in 2005 by the Melbourne Business school, interviewing over 600 business and organizational leaders, found that of 20 leadership qualities, empathy ranked 4th highest (Garner, 2009, p. 85). Garner (2009) concludes that even in the military, the “path towards effective leadership is expertise, and empathy” and that even in a revision of Army leadership doctrine raised empathy to an essential attribute for leadership (p. 84). Related evidence shows that empathy becomes an increasingly more important element of leadership in high-trauma events as it invites mutual trust and codifies relationships based on that trust (Polymilis, 2010, p. 3). In successful global corporations, in the military, and in high reliability organizations (police, military, medical, etc) empathy, despite its “soft” stereotype, is noted as critically important to being the most effective leader. How do empathetic leaders then bring this effectiveness to organizations, and what are the benefits of the empathetic leader?

Benefits of Empathy and Empathetic Leaders
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Research has shown that empathetic leaders inspire effective organizations because having a high degree of empathy creates better relationships, through effective communication which brings more trust to an organization. “Empathetic leaders enhance mutual communication and generate mutual trust within their group between the leader and the follower” (Mackay, Hughes, & Carver, 1990, p. 57). The bi-products of the trust range from open communication, to higher degree of affiliation, to a greater confidence of leadership and organization, to willingness and optimism in support of corporate goals and objectives (Garner, 2009, p. 87). A high degree of empathy in an organization’s leaders has shown to help with team building, enable greater cross-cultural dialogue in the rise of globalization, and retain talent (Goleman, 2004, p. 8). It may even lead to reduced costs associated with acquiring, training, and retaining human resources (Polymillis, 2010, p. 4). There is significant evidence that empathy translates into building effective and successful organizations but it all begins with relationship building.

Garner (2009) explains “humans desire supportive relationships” and empathy is key to building trust in relationships, fostering “better communication, tighter cohesion, stronger discipline, and greater morale” in organizations (p. 84). Remembering the previously stated definition, empathy allows leaders to “enter into another’s perception and becoming thoroughly at home with it…without prejudice” (p. 85). In this way, leaders achieve an emotional connection with a person and build a strong, trusting relationship. “Empathy is often associated with sensing another’s feelings. Many people believe that it is the single most important quality in developing human relationships” (p. 85). By developing the relationships, the empathetic leader encourages communication. Simple things such as finding out and understanding as much about another person as possible, enables empathetic leaders to identify synergies that exist and
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share common ground (Rush, 2015, p. 18). The understanding, and trust in leadership can translate into many other benefits.

Empathetic leaders have been shown to build teams effectively in the corporate office and on a global inter-cultural team. Team building is difficult and challenging due to managing different personalities, managing egos, and building a consensus which is often emotionally charged. An empathetic leader understands viewpoints, and listens to everyone in the group, encouraging open communication and encouraging constructive complaints (Goleman, 2004, p. 8). In this way, the empathetic leader inspires collaboration and instills teamwork and it works as well on inter-cultural and global teams. “Cross-cultural dialog can easily lead to miscues and misunderstandings” (p. 8). Empathy helps staying attuned to body language cues, and helps with the deep understanding of important cultural and ethnic differences (p. 8). A more global economy will recognize the value of more empathetic leadership.

Empathy can play a key role in the retention of talent, in a highly competitive economy because of their want and ability to coach and develop people. Goleman (2004) notes that repeatedly “it’s been shown that coaching and mentoring pay off not just in better performance, but also increased job satisfaction, and decreased turnover” (p. 8). Empathetic leaders “know when to push for better performance and when to hold back” (p. 9). Empathetic leaders can sense what motivates people because they have an invested relationship with that individual, and that can translate into talent retention.

There are many benefits from harnessing empathy into an organization and it begins with ability to establish trust and build a relationship with the leader’s followers. As the leader nurtures an empathetic climate, the organization becomes more cohesive and caring. The
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followers desire to emulate their leader[ship] and an empathic climate permeates throughout the organization…manifest[ed] through better performance and greater loyalty toward the organization” (Garner, 2009, p. 89). Is it possible to develop empathic leaders?

Developing Empathy

Many research points that a leader can become more empathetic but there seems to be some question if all leaders can. “Scientific inquiry has suggested that there is a genetic component to emotional intelligence. Psychological and developmental research indicates that nurture plays a role as well” Goleman, 2004, p. 4). Goleman adds that “emotional intelligence increases with age…yet even with maturity some people still need training” (p. 4). Researchers also claim that the existence of empathy is a matter of brain structure (Polymilis, 2010, p. 4). Importantly emphasized is the need for a sincere desire and concerted effort to build and develop (Goleman, 2004, p. 4). Leaders can develop empathy skills with maturity, experience, age, and devotion.

The process to becoming a leader with an increased degree of empathy begins with self-assessment (Garner, 2009, p. 90). If a leader knows they are deficient, that is likely motivation for searching for a fix. Goleman (2004) suggests that pairing with a coach can produce positive results by giving practice and feedback (p. 4). A coach can “help people break old behavioral habits and establish new ones” (p. 4). Garner (2009) suggests that the complexity with learning empathy lies with empathetic listening as it takes a physical and emotional transmission that is a much deeper level of listening (pp. 90-91). To be an empathetic leader, people must show a genuine curiosity about their followers lives and must be show the greatest amount of care. Companies can instill an empathic climate through emulation of other empathetic leaders. If
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there isn’t a will or desire, research suggests that leaders are unlikely to develop into empathetic leaders.

Final Thoughts in Review

The goal and overall purpose of this paper was to ask the question “how empathy and empathetic leaders effect an organization?” To research an answer this paper first reviewed the leadership trait of empathy and asked how important the trait was in comparison to other notable traits finding that empathy is among the most desired traits. One study revealed that empathy may be up to twice as important as cognitive traits (Goleman, 2004, p. 1). The reasons for this is empathy builds understanding, which in turn builds trusting relationships, which translates into a better performing organization. Then, the paper tried to answer the heart of the question by researching the benefits that empathy and empathetic leaders can give to organizations finding that benefits abound when an organization has an empathic climate reinforced by empathetic leaders. Built on trust, open communication, and a personal relationship with their followers, empathetic leaders were shown to increase performance in employees, and increase effectiveness of an organization. A final question posed in this paper was if empathy can be developed. The research showed that with a sincere desire, a leader could increase their degree of empathy with the most complex developmental challenge coming from empathetic listening. This seems logical understanding that the basis for empathy is developing a trusting relationship.
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References


