

**The Importance of Empathy:
A Significant Feature of the Mindset of Successful People Part I
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I have had the opportunity to offer workshops for parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and business people throughout the United States and abroad. At these presentations I have discussed a variety of topics related to self-esteem, motivation, discipline, resilience, strategies for success, balancing one's personal and professional life, parenting and family relationships, and creating positive home, school, and business environments. The comments and questions raised at these presentations have provided me with invaluable information about the kinds of issues and topics that are most relevant to those in attendance. While some issues are unique to particular audiences or environments (e.g., teachers; business people), other topics appear to have a universal flavor, impacting on all of us.

The path of my career has led me from focusing primarily on "pathology" or what is wrong with people to a more strength-based model. Consequently, I have become increasingly interested in understanding the mindset of parents, teachers, therapists, or leaders who appear to be very successful in these roles. I have wondered if these successful individuals possess common characteristics that can be identified and learned by others. The work of such renowned social scientists as Stephen Covey and Daniel Goleman offer testimony that there are some noteworthy commonalities in the ways in which successful individuals approach their work and their relationships.

I should emphasize that when I use the word "success" I am not defining it in terms of one's income level or social status. While these may be important variables, I am more interested in such dimensions of success as satisfaction and contentment with one's life, one's abilities to strive for excellence but not be derailed by mistakes, one's capacity to relate comfortably with and compassionately towards others, and one's gift for helping others to feel special and appreciated.

I have frequently been asked at my workshops what I consider to be one of the most salient characteristics of a successful parent or teacher or business leader. While there are several, what I typically mention first is the ability to be empathic. It is interesting that in his seminal writings about the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Daniel Goleman

lists empathy as one of the main components of EQ. I would like to devote the first couple of columns written for my Web site to the concept of empathy.

Simply defined, empathy is the capacity to put oneself inside the shoes of another person and to see the world through that person's eyes. Empathy implies that you have trained yourself to consider how other people perceive situations, how they perceive you, and how they would describe you. If a person is lacking in empathy, he or she is likely to misread what is transpiring in a situation and misunderstand the intentions of others.

It has been my experience that while many individuals consider themselves to be empathic, believing that they always attempt to understand and appreciate the other person's point of view, in fact, that is not the case. Achieving empathy requires a great deal of diligence and thoughtfulness. Not surprisingly, I have found that typically it is easier to be empathic towards those people whose ideas agree with ours, toward those children who do what we request, towards those students who meet all of our requirements. It is much more difficult to be empathic when we are upset, angry, disappointed, or frustrated with another person. In such situations our negative feelings will often serve as a roadblock, not permitting us to see the world through the eyes of the person with whom we are upset so that even well-meaning, caring people are likely to say or do things that intensify the negative feelings.

The person striving to be empathic is guided by a mindset that asks several key questions. I should like to highlight two of these questions. The first is, "In anything I say or do, what do I hope to accomplish?" Many people are able to answer this question, which basically focuses on one's goals and/or objectives. The second question relates directly to empathy, namely, "Am I saying or doing it in a way in which the other person will be most responsive to hearing and listening to me?" While many individuals know what they hope to accomplish, I have witnessed countless examples of well-meaning parents, teachers, mental health professionals, and business people saying or doing things that actually are counterproductive and work against their goals.

For instance, I once consulted with a business executive who said he motivated his staff by encouraging them to come up with new ideas. On the surface this appeared to be a sound strategy rooted in the notion of reinforcing problem solving and ownership. However, he told me that he was often disappointed by the "poor" ideas that were presented to him. I wondered how he responded to these "poor" ideas and he said that he believed in

honesty and he told his employees, "These ideas are not good. I can't understand why you can't be more creative." In addition, he made little, if any, attempt to compliment his staff for their productive ideas, believing that negative feedback was a more effective motivator than positive feedback. Interestingly, he was surprised by the number of staff who resigned. This obviously intelligent man knew what his goals were, namely, to have a staff that generated creative ideas, but his kind of intelligence appeared to have little relationship with empathy as he said things that angered his employees. An empathic supervisor would have asked the following questions, questions which may have helped him to avoid the counterproductive practice of criticizing (and losing) his employees: "Am I giving feedback in a way in which my staff will be most receptive to listening to me?" "Would I like anyone to say things to me the way I said it to my staff?" When we ask these kinds of questions, we are practicing empathy.

Let me offer another example. Parents with a temperamentally shy daughter (we now know that many youngsters are born shy or cautious) constantly implored her to make friends. Understandably, their goal was for her to develop friendships. However, given their anxiety about their daughter's peer relationships, they frequently asked her, "Did you speak with any kids in school today?" "Did you invite anyone over to play?" When this child was with her parents and met people they knew, she would often glance down and her parents would tell her in front of the others to say hello, barely disguising their anger and frustration. Although not intended, their response to their daughter's shyness actually increased her withdrawal. While all of us want our children to be socially adept and to have many friends, how would we feel if we were shy and our spouse or boss constantly reminded us, especially in front of others, to speak up and not be so shy?

Many parents of shy children have asked me what they can say that would be more empathic. I answer that they can tell their child privately, "I know that it isn't easy for you to say hello. A lot of kids have the same difficulty. But maybe together we can figure out what will begin to help since many kids as they grow find it easier to say hello to others and learn what to say to their friends." I have seen a simple statement such as this, which contains a heavy dose of empathy, compassion, and hope, begin to establish the foundation for a child to feel increasingly accepted. This empathy and acceptance establishes an encouraging tone that allows a child with the assistance of parents, to develop strategies to be less withdrawn and shy.

A final illustration of the importance of empathy occurred when I had the opportunity to speak with a number of young adults who as children and adolescents had encountered problems in school. When I asked them to give an example of the least useful advice they received as youngsters (I believe it is important for us to learn what things we say and do that are counterproductive), I was impressed with how many immediately answered, "When I was told to try harder." At first glance being told to try harder might seem encouraging, but it was often experienced as judgmental and accusatory. One person said to me, "How did they know I wasn't trying hard? Is there a test for trying?" Being empathic helps us to be more aware of a saying something that is perceived in a negative way. Assume that you were a teacher having a difficult time with your class and mentioned your struggles to your principal and colleagues. How would you feel if their response was, "Well, you just have to try harder!"?

As noted earlier, I believe that empathy is one of the most vital skills in any relationship and is imbedded in the mindset of the successful person. In many ways empathy is reflected in the golden rule, "Never say or do to another person what you would not want said or done to you." I have frequently been asked if I think that empathy can be learned and strengthened. I believe it can. In my next column I will describe some of the roadblocks to becoming more empathic and exercises that one can use as a parent, spouse, teacher, health professional, or business leader to enhance one's ability to be empathic.

One final comment: Please feel free to email me with any comments or questions you have about this column or about other topics you would like me to address in future columns.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>