

**The Importance of Empathy:
A Significant Feature of the Mindset of Successful People**

Part II

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In my last column I emphasized that a common characteristic of individuals who are successful as business leaders, teachers, parents, spouses, or healthcare professionals is their ability to be empathic. Empathic people are skilled in placing themselves inside the shoes of another person and seeing the world through that person's eyes. It is not surprising that Daniel Goleman listed empathy as one of the main components of emotional intelligence. In my activities as a therapist and consultant as well as in my personal life, I have come to believe that empathy is implicated in all of our relationships, impacting on the satisfaction and effectiveness with which we interact with others.

As I noted in my last column, people who are empathic have developed a mindset that asks, "In anything I say or do, am I saying or doing it in a way in which other people will be most responsive to listening to me?" By posing this question, I am not suggesting that we assume the role of amateur psychologist, attempting to analyze every word we utter in every interaction we have (if we did, we are likely to become disorganized, overwhelmed, and paralyzed), but rather that we keep in mind that if we want others to appreciate what we are communicating, if we want others to respond to and work cooperatively with us, then we must consider their perspective and how they perceive us. I know that I attempt to use empathy to guide all aspects of my work, influencing not only what I say, but how I say things, and directing the kinds of questions I ask that will nurture empathy in others. For instance, when I am engaged in marital therapy it is not unusual for me to ask each spouse to describe how he or she feels the other views the marriage, or to ask parents to describe how they think their child sees them, or to ask business leaders how their employees would describe them. These questions have a common purpose, namely, to assess and place the spotlight on empathy.

In my workshops I am frequently asked if empathy can be learned. The question is posed in several forms. Those raising or working with children wonder if there are ways of increasing a child's capacity to be empathic, especially aware that a lack of empathy can be a risk factor that compromises the formation of friendships and even contributes to

some children hurting others. Parents have also wondered whether their own ability to be empathic can be strengthened. In a similar fashion business leaders have asked what is necessary to enhance empathy in themselves and in their employees. While some individuals, such as those with so-called easy temperaments who grow up in homes where empathy is an essential ingredient of family life, will have an easier time developing empathy than others, I believe it is a skill that can be nurtured even in those children and adults who I would describe as having an “empathy deficit.” Before considering what steps we can take to strengthen empathy in ourselves, it may be helpful to examine briefly some of the obstacles that we may face as we take these steps. An increased awareness of these obstacles will lessen their potency and make them easier to manage.

1. A Lack of Models: If we grew up in a home in which our parents were not empathic, in which our communications were not validated, in which we were told how we should feel or not feel, it is more difficult to learn to take the perspective of another person. While having empathic parents does not guarantee that we will become empathic, it is certainly an important factor. I recall an initial family therapy meeting in which a teenage girl mentioned that she felt very depressed. Her mother responded, “But there’s no reason for you to be depressed. We give you everything you need and we’re a loving family.” While mother’s intention may have been to be reassuring, her failure to acknowledge what her daughter was saying led the daughter to withdraw and become more sullen. If mother had been empathic and validated what her daughter had said (e.g., “I’m glad you could let us know how you feel. Together we can try to figure out what would help you to feel less depressed”), I am certain her daughter would have been more responsive and in addition, would have been exposed to someone demonstrating empathy.

2. Empathy Is Sacrificed when We Are Upset, Angry, or Disappointed with the Other Person (People): While most individuals consider themselves to be empathic, in fact, it is difficult to be empathic when we are frustrated or angry with others. I have witnessed people who are angry say hurtful things to their children, their spouse, their students, their employees that they would not have said if they were less stressed and frustrated. For example, I was seeing a shy, socially immature seven-year-old boy in therapy who received an invitation to go to a classmate’s birthday party. He was very excited since he typically was not invited to such

events. However, the party proved to be a disaster when several of the other boys said to him that he didn't belong at the party. When his mother came to pick him up, he was seated by himself, looking withdrawn and sad. While his mother was a caring person, when she saw him all alone, her anxiety and frustration about his isolation from peers was aroused and she said to him, "No wonder you don't have any friends, you always sit by yourself!" The moment these words were uttered she wished she could take them back, especially as she observed her son's tears. She cried as she described this situation at our next meeting, saying that she couldn't believe she would say something like this to her son. Her anxiety and disappointment had interfered with her capacity to be empathic and offer her son the support he needed.

3. I'm Right, You're Wrong! There are a number of people who have a reflex negative reaction towards anyone who has an opinion different from theirs. They feel threatened when someone questions their point of view, immediately becoming defensive and failing to appreciate the other person's perspective. Their entire demeanor suggests that they are poised for attack and will not permit alternative views to enter their space. I consulted with one manager who had lost a number of his staff. At first he voiced surprise that so many had quit, believing that he encouraged and welcomed their input. However, what I learned in my consultation was that when an employee voiced concern about how difficult it was to give him feedback since he became angry if the feedback was not totally positive, he confirmed this observation by abruptly telling this employee that the latter had "difficulty with authority." This manager's need to be right and his intense defensiveness blinded him from seeing other possible perspectives. I have seen the same dynamic in parent-child relationships as well as teacher-child relationships. It is difficult to be empathic when we are constantly defensive and not willing to listen to others. Collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork are virtually impossible to achieve under such conditions.

Given these obstacles, what is it that we can do to strengthen our ability to be empathic? What follows are some guidelines and exercises. While they may be based on commonsense, they require practice and diligence and sometimes the input or feedback of another person who can offer an objective view. However, I believe that if we can keep

these guidelines in focus, we can achieve greater empathy.

1. Accept that Empathy is a Vital Skill for Successful Relationships: This acceptance typically demands that we must be very clear about what empathy is and is not. Some people confuse being empathic with giving in or not being assertive. Empathy has nothing to do with giving in. One can be empathic and yet disagree with another person. One can be empathic and validate what another person is saying, but have an entirely different view of the situation. For instance, an excellent teacher I knew was accused by one of her students of not being fair when he had to serve detention for insulting other students. He had already been given a warning. Rather than become defensive and recite a litany of examples of things that this student had done to warrant detention, the teacher said, “I know you think I’m not fair and I’m glad you could tell. Since that is how you feel, I think it’s important for us to review what led up to the detention, especially since I would not like to see it happen again and I don’t want you to think I’m not being fair.” By first validating the student’s perception, the teacher created a climate in which this student was less defensive and more open to listening to the teacher’s point of view, resulting in the student eventually taking responsibility for his own behavior.

2. Exercise, Exercise, Exercise: In my workshops I use the following exercise both to highlight the importance of empathy and to provide participants with an activity to strengthen their ability to be empathic. If my talk is for teachers, I ask them to use a few words to describe a teacher they liked and a few words to describe a teacher they did not like when they were students. I then observe that just as they have words to describe their teachers, their students have words to describe them. I next say, “What if I interviewed your students and asked them to describe you. What words would you hope they use to describe you? What words would they actually use? How close would the words you hope they use be to the words they actually use?” I also ask them to think about what changes they have to make so that the actual descriptions would be closer to the desired descriptions.

Similarly, in my presentations for parents or healthcare professionals or business leaders, I ask them to reflect upon how their children or clients/patients or employees would describe them and how they hoped they would describe them. What this exercise accomplishes is to emphasize that every time we interact with others they form an image of us and that this

image will play a large role in determining how comfortably and cooperatively they will relate to us. By asking how others see us, it vividly calls attention to the significance of empathy. I have had many people say to me that they kept the questions involved in these exercises in mind as they interacted with their children or students or employees or patients and that by doing so it enhanced these relationships.

3. Treat Others as We Would Want to Be Treated: Closely linked to the exercises I prescribe is a question we must consider as we interact with others, namely, “When we say or do things with our child (student, employee, patient), would we want anyone to say or do things to us in the same way?” I recall observing a young child spilling a glass of milk in a restaurant. In response, his father slapped his hand and said, “What’s the matter with you? You never think about what you’re doing. Use your brains!” I wondered how that father would have felt if he had spilled something, and someone had slapped his hand and yelled at him. Would the father have learned anything or would he mainly be resentful? Or, let’s take the earlier example of the manager who responded to someone disagreeing with him by accusing that person of having “problems with authority.” How would this manager feel if his boss disagreed with something he said by dismissing his comments and yelling, “You have trouble with authority.” As another example, which I described in my last column, how would teachers who constantly exhorted students who were struggling in school to “try harder” feel if they were having difficulty with aspects of their job and instead of offering support their principal said, “You wouldn’t have these problems if you tried harder and put in more effort!”?

4. Honesty and Self-Reflection: While my recommendations for promoting empathy may on the surface appear easy to accomplish, we all too often fail to consider or practice them. If we find ourselves constantly at odds with others, if our relationships are marked by anger, stress, and conflict, if others tend to tune us out, then it is advantageous to us as well as advantageous to those with whom we interact to engage in self-reflection and examine with honesty and a lack of defensiveness the obstacles to our becoming more empathic. For instance, a father with whom I was working regularly recited to his son a list of things that he thought needed improvement (e.g., homework being done on time, keeping a cleaner room, having “better” friends). His son’s behavior did not change. The father said, “He doesn’t

listen to me.” I wondered what he could do so that his son might listen to him and how he would feel if someone recited the same list to him night after night after night. It was as if a revelation struck this father when he said, “I would probably do what my son does. Who wants to hear one negative thing after another?”

Consequently, father began to focus on things his son did well, striving to lessen comments that his son experienced as nagging. Their relationship improved noticeably.

As occurred with this father, self-reflection can help us to appreciate what triggers our anger or disappointment, how we can speak with people so that they will listen to us even when we are frustrated with them, and how we would like others to treat us. In this process of self-reflection and honesty, we may require the support and insight of an objective person, perhaps a friend or relative with whom we feel comfortable. If the obstacles persist, we should seek the guidance of a counselor/therapist. And remember, if you have struggled for years with problems pertaining to empathy, it may take a while to change. Don't become discouraged. I believe very strongly that the benefits of being empathic and having satisfying personal and professional relationships warrant whatever time and energy are required to accomplish this goal.

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