



WORK THE EMPATHY MUSCLE

Right now the entire western world is caught up in uncertainty about the future. In these stressful times we can easily become so pre-occupied with concerns for our own future that we fail to empathise with people less fortunate than ourselves. Because such people may be out of sight or unknown to us, we can come to view them as irritations; as “things” to be avoided. In this way we ourselves become de-humanised.

ARTICLE BY JOHN VARNEY, LEAD FACILITATOR - CENTRE FOR MANAGEMENT CREATIVITY

As the voices of intolerance become louder we should take care not to lose sight of the fact that we are talking of fellow human beings. We might easily one day find ourselves on the other end of life's see-saw. Empathy with those who are struggling to cope, although a wonderful sentiment, is not enough in itself to create a better future. Long ago I used to work with groups of youngsters who had been in trouble with the law. Their social workers empathised with them to the point of being in need of treatment themselves, and patently prevented their charges from learning from developmental opportunities. While we were not unsympathetic, our approach was to expect the youngsters to rise to the challenges of working together to succeed. Most did so, and for those who did it proved to be life-changing.

At the other end of the spectrum, I have seen the same phenomenon with management teams who, faced with a challenge, have tried to cling to their known world. Empathy with one another triggered defensiveness, preventing good people from rising to the occasion. This is weak empathy. For people to grow to meet the challenges of change, empathy needs to be accompanied by those old virtues of faith, hope and love; what we might call strong empathy. Without a leap of faith, people render themselves impotent. Without hope they are not drawn to clearly visualise success. Without love they cannot support one another in bold action. Empathy in isolation wraps feelings of insecurity in protective padding under which courage is suppressed.

Imagine you are taking people on a trek in the wild when you come across a deep abyss. Empathising with people who are fearful makes you fearful too and guarantees failure. Better, then, to empathise with whatever capacity people have to believe in the possibility of crossing to the other side and thriving on the onward journey. This will not guarantee success but might make it possible. A success oriented mind-set is capable of upbeat and positive thinking, coupling hope of a good outcome with faith in one-another's



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capacity to cope, whatever emerges. When people have made the crossing their thinking is future oriented, positive and upbeat. They may be the same people but they will have been transformed by their experience. Before the event, putting them in touch with that glorious aspect of themselves will serve them better than comforting them in their time of weakness. So, besides empathising, you need to lovingly raise aspiration and conjure up faith and hope.

When you are faced with serious challenges, perhaps major changes that have uncertain outcomes, take care how you place your empathy. This does not mean being harsh and un-feeling, but positioning your feelings beyond the abyss, so that people are encouraged to be bold. Your empathy will lie with that part of them that can rise to the challenge. Instead of comforting them as they become victims of circumstance, you support them in facing risks by calling forth their courage and confidence. Even if the enterprise fails, they will be stronger for having met the challenge with their best efforts. Recall Shakespeare's Henry V's speeches on the eve of battles at Harfleur and Agincourt. He did not lack empathy but drew out the best in his troops: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more..." Believe in people's potential! By seeing what they themselves cannot, your empathy can help them make their choices. Those who are prepared to meet the challenge can be supported and those who cannot, instead of holding back their colleagues, can be let go lightly to find their fortunes in less challenging ways. The role of HR is to further the sense of purpose of the organisation, enabling everyone to grow through meeting the challenges of their roles. Yes, we need to manage with empathy - and to do so in ways that enable everyone to achieve their potential. ●

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