BLOG

Imagine walking into work each day with a culture of acceptance, authenticity, and genuine support. This is what an organization looks like that integrates empathy in big and small ways, and that can be us! Each of us have experienced empathy in our lives, whether we've given or received it. What you may not know are all the professional benefits a workplace can experience with a culture of empathy.

Can you think of a time when you were shown empathy—or better yet, when you presented empathy to someone—and you regretted it? Probably not. Empathy has been represented as a 'soft skill' while assertiveness, confidence, and authority prevail as desired leadership traits. Katherine Bell writes, "As a writer and teacher of fiction, I've learned that empathy isn't about being nice or tolerant. It's not about feeling sorry for people or giving them the benefit of the doubt. It's an act of imagination in which you try to look at the world from the perspective of another person, a human being whose history and point of view are as complex as your own." (*Empathy: Not Such a Soft Skill*, HBR, 2009). Read the full article here: https://hbr.org/2009/05/empathy-not-such-a-soft-skill. I'm excited to see the tables start to turn, and while confidence isn't inherently bad, empathy is the golden ticket to effective communication, clear decision making, and a healthier work culture.

This authentic approach is what we need to adopt in our organization. Not only will empathy enhance open-mindedness and reshape perspectives, but it will lead us towards more productive—and less painful—meetings. Ann McKee describes this 'meetings should be better' theory, "Empathy is a competency that allows you to read people. Who is supporting whom? Who is pissed off and who is coasting? Where is the resistance? This isn't as easy as it seems. Sometimes, the smartest resisters often look like supporters, but they're not supportive at all. They're smart, sneaky idea-killers." (*Empathy Is Key to a Great Meeting,* HBR, 2015). Gain more insight from McKee in the full article: https://hbr.org/2015/03/empathy-is-key-to-a-great-meeting. If each of us apply this approach of curiosity and attentiveness, we can accomplish more and have every voice heard—spoken or not.

"It's not that empathy isn't important. On the contrary, it is essential." (*Productive Conversations Take Real Empathy*, HBR, 2020.) This quote comes from a Harvard Business Review article by Peter Bregman, who tells a gut-wrenching story during his time as a ski instructor. He experienced severe pain on the job and his supervisor met him in the medical unit, attacking him with questions regarding worker's comp. Had he first met Bregman's pain with empathy, they could have had a completely different conversation.

This is an easy place for all of us to start: always start with empathy. When you place empathy at the front of a conversation, both parties can walk away with a better attitude. "At that point, it would actually be challenging—it would feel disingenuous, not just to me, but to him—to treat me like a hostile witness. Instead of having a confrontational conversation that muddied the truth, we would have a collaborative one that landed upon it," says Bregman. I encourage you to read Bregman's full story: https://hbr.org/2020/03/productive-conversations-take-real-empathy.

If you're thinking, 'How can I get better at empathy?' then here's a podcast: Empathy Gym, from Hidden Brain on NPR. This episode explains that we can all improve our capacity to experience and present empathy. "Zaki argues that empathy is like a muscle—it can be strengthened with exercise and it can atrophy when idle." (You 2.0: Empath Gym, Hidden Brain, 2020). We can glean more than a few examples of how to increase empathy, including by reading more fiction novels. "There's a fair amount of evidence now that the more fiction that people read, the more empathetic that they become," says Stanford psychologist Jamil Zaki. "Because fiction is one of the most powerful ways to connect with people who are different from us who we might not have a chance to meet otherwise."

It's an exceptional thing to meet someone who is unlike yourself and take the time to listen, learn, and grow rather than disregard their different views. There's nothing more unhelpful than echo chambers, or being solely surrounded by like-minded individuals who praise and repeat the same songs. "Oftentimes, when we encounter someone who's different from ourselves and has an opinion or a viewpoint maybe that we even abhor, it's easy to just view them as being either obtuse or dishonest or both," says Zaki. "But that's a mistake. I think empathy at a deep level is the understanding that someone else's world is just as real as yours." (You 2.0: Empath Gym, Hidden Brain, 2020). Listen to the full podcast here: https://www.npr.org/2020/08/31/907943965/you-2-0-empathy-gym.

Last but not least, we can all learn about empathy and vulnerability from Brené Brown. Her viral YouTube video from January 2011, The Power of Vulnerability, has set the tone for innovative professional industries everywhere (if you haven't seen her TedTalk, please do: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlF7o). Contrary to common believe, vulnerability is anything but a weakness. "In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be really seen." Brown's quote is the key to building trust and creating bonds within our workplace, that allow us perform at our best. Although, being vulnerable isn't easy, otherwise everyone would do it. "The origin of the word "courage" comes from the word "cour" which means heart, and it means to completely share your story with you whole heart," says Brown.

It's time for us to all show courage, through empathy.

LEADERSHIP MODEL: EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

I am intrigued and driven by emotional intelligence, so this is the model I'm choosing to expand upon. In order to have successful communication, a healthy self-view, humble self-awareness, and thriving relationships, emotional intelligence is as necessary as any other skill.

There are four main components to emotional intelligence: **social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship management.** Noted in the names of each sector, emotional intelligence is a system organized by different aspects of internal and external awareness and management.

Social awareness is the core element of empathy. Opening your eyes to the experiences and perspectives of others allows for a greater understanding of the social environment around you. This is also true for organizations and having an empathetic awareness of those who make up a larger group. Exercising social awareness is stopping to listen when an individual is speaking to you instead of absentmindedly hearing them. Giving social empathy is first thinking of the family member or friend who needs something that you can provide, and thinking of your needs second. Acting on social awareness in an organization looks like asking the questions and digging into layers of a situation instead of assuming you already know the answer.

This particular area of emotional intelligence is a passion of mine. I gain connection, energy, and joy from giving empathy to others, and I feel a deep sense of gratitude when I'm able to receive it. I've always been told that I'm inquisitive, but more recently I've learned how to ask the *right* questions. One area of growth in my social awareness is giving people my undivided attention when they're speaking to me, as I'm prone to multi-tasking, unknowing how rude that can be when someone is seeking my attention.

Self-awareness is the introspective quality of knowing your own strengths, weaknesses, values, habits, and reactions. Internal awareness is how we perceive ourselves and all the complexities of our thoughts and feelings, and external awareness is the perception that others have of us. Activating your self-awareness looks like knowing what amplifies your stress levels and reacting with an action, decision, or solution to diminish that stress. Self-awareness can be reciting affirmations to boost your self-confidence before meeting with a colleague who is intimidating or attacks your self-worth.

This component of emotional intelligence is my highest strength among the others, and I continually revisit my mental health triggers and weaknesses, take joy in my strengths, and re-evaluate my responses to others when they don't reflect my values. As a way to continue strengthening my self-awareness, I'm going to allow for more time to reflect during my busy weekly schedule. Otherwise, I notice I can subconsciously plow through my to-do lists and daily activities without taking a moment to recognize my emotions and note how they move through my experiences.

Self-management—or previously managing emotions and motivating oneself—is one all-encompassing pillar of controlling your internal being and external actions. This category is the crucial next step after self-awareness. For example, if you recognize that patience is one of your weaknesses, you can activate self-management to see how and where in your life patience is most needed, and work to integrate patience in those circumstances. Maintaining a positive outlook instead of replaying the failures you've experiences is an act of grace to yourself that's

essential for personal growth. Exercising self-management can look like adapting emotionally to a new situation, or adapting your outlook to respond to a recurring situation in a new way.

This component is where I need to do the most work, specifically with managing my emotions when my morals are being challenged or disregarded, and remaining calm in unnerving or high-stress circumstances. My previous goal of reflection will help me to understand my emotions, and have a healthy response accordingly to the opportunity at hand.

Last but not least, **relationship management** is the awareness of the connection you have with others and how you contribute to those relationships. One's relationship management can directly correlate with their ability to influence others, or be a successful coach or mentor. Possessing strong relationship management skills is also relevant for healthy conflict management or being the bridge where teamwork can thrive. Utilizing relationship management is essential when overseeing a team at work that needs guidance and encouragement, or mediating a tough conversation with a family member who doesn't see eye-to-eye. This category was my second-highest in the emotional intelligence assessment, and I recognize that strength in my experience with inspiring, influencing, and teamwork for athletic teams and social group settings.

Depending on the context, this aspect of emotional intelligence comes naturally to me. I'm inclined to know more about the people in my life, and desire to build strong bonds with each and every one. When I'm in a team environment, guiding the conversation and taking organizational actions to bring us all to success is my first instinct. On the other hand, conflict-management conversations require more patience and brain power as I pause to think through the situation. If I find myself in an argument or tough conversation, I either take a breather and revisit the interaction when I've had more time to think and assess what's happening, or I favor listening first and speaking second so I don't assume for the other person. This is something I've learned from experience, both by assuming for others and through times when others assumed for me.

After analyzing each component of emotional intelligence, and comparing those definitions with my personal strengths, weaknesses, and life experiences, I feel confident in my ability to charge forward and improve my overall EI.

CASE STUDY

To briefly summarize, my response is to the situation where a highly esteemed scientist is recruited to work at a biotech company, and things become sour. Colleagues have reported threatening behavior and bullying and personally attacking minorities and members of the LGBTQ+ community, to the point of their absence in meetings. Police reports have been made and an investigation run, but his actions were evaluated as "not crossing the line" and there's no sight of him leaving.

In an ideal situation, neither settling in court with a nondisclosure agreement or fighting for separation in court are preferred, because the harm caused can't be undone either way. The number one goal is to remove this individual from the workplace, for the emotional and mental health of all coworkers. In order to repair and then preserve the culture of the workforce—and ensure the permanent removal of the disgruntled scientist—I would choose the nondisclosure agreement to remove him and break the 5-year contract he was given.

Viewing the nondisclosure agreement as a "win" or "the bully got away with it" is only a perspective; not a fact. Justice feels satisfying and rewarding, but after the numerous attempts of correction—all responding with narcissism, rejection, and deflection—it will be very difficult to show this person how in the wrong they are. The realistic, best case scenario is to remove the scientist from the lives of his coworkers, and hope he reflects later in life in order to recognize the poor attitude, offensive behavior, and damage that he caused.

Imagining the fragile emotional state I would be in as a coworker of this disrespectful scientist, my first priority would be to have separation. I'd move swiftly and take action to reflect my values of protecting my colleagues' wellbeing. No one should fear the environment where they work and exist for 40+ hours a week, and from the description of multiple disciplinary approaches, this individual seems to be almost impossible to manage. In order to save the biotech company from aggressive turnover, I would prioritize removing him as soon as possible and without the chance of failure—which is possible by taking him to court.

From the situation's description, it sounds like the group's feelings and thoughts have been heard over the course of the scientist's employment. Putting my relationships first and using an authentic approach of heart, I'd make a point to hear everyone who wants to speak up in order to prevent important perspectives going unsaid. Amplifying all the voices in the company will also help to make an informed decision with all information present.

Regardless of the decision, the most important thing to do is follow-through. Along with trusting my morals and listening to those around me, I can't make a bad decision if I do what I say I will do, and not do what I say I will not do. This is the surest way to be an authentic leader.