

## **Empathy - the sought after quality in ensuring effective change performance**

Richard Hemsworth (Project Coach and EPMO Director)

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Why are Fortune 100 companies, and leading disruptor businesses, increasingly using empathy as a selection criteria for recruitment of new employees and for internal promotion? Perhaps in understanding the customer needs, there is a greater opportunity to provide outstanding customer service, increase market share, develop focused products that meet latent demand, or just increase rapport in customer interactions.

A top priority for many organisations is to look beyond traditional strategies for selecting change leaders. And no wonder. Ineffective managers are expensive, costing organisations millions of dollars each year in direct and indirect costs. Surprisingly, ineffective managers make up half of today's organisational management pool according to a series of studies (Gentry, 2010; Gentry & Chappelow, 2009).

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the their frame of reference; that is, the capacity to place yourself in their shoes and feel what they are feel.

Transformational leaders need empathy in order to show their followers that they care for their needs and achievement (Bass, 1985). Authentic leaders also need to have empathy in order to be aware of others (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Empathy is also a key part of emotional intelligence that several researchers believe is critical to being an effective leader (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; George, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Kate Jenkins (Forbes Magazine) writes about the 'disconcerting reality that even in the midst of an unemployment crisis, employers across industries are still unable to find the talent profiles they need'. How is it possible that even highly educated candidates are unable to find skilled work when millions of open positions go unfilled? Evidence indicates that this talent gap is not due to the absence of technical skills, as one might expect, but rather to the absence of 'soft skills,' in prospective candidates. These soft skills primarily refer to interpersonal and general analytic abilities like teamwork, empathy, leadership, negotiation, adaptability, and problem solving.

To understand if empathy has an influence on a manager's job performance, the Centre for Creative Leadership analysed data from 6,731 managers in 38 countries. Key findings of the study were:

- Empathy is positively related to job performance.
- Empathy is more important to job performance in some cultures than others.

So, Google uses behavioural questioning to move past technical capability. Facebook uses *StrengthsFinder* to deploy talent efficiently. Regardless of the job openings they have available, Facebook simply hires the smartest people it can find, then uses StrengthsFinder results to

understand their talents and create a job tailored to the candidate. In each case the key focus is on change leadership to improve the business deliverables.

### **Why should a Change Leader Practice Empathy?**

Successful project change leaders need to lead people, collaborate with others, be able to cross organisational and cultural boundaries and need to create shared direction, alignment, and commitment between social groups with very different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures. Empathy goes a long way toward meeting these people-oriented managerial and leadership requirements.

Developing empathy means that, as a change leader, you will be more likely to:

- treat the people you care about the way they wish you would treat them
- better understand the needs of people around you
- more clearly understand the perception you create in others with your words and actions
- understand the unspoken parts of your communication with others
- better understand the needs of your customers at work
- have less trouble dealing with interpersonal conflict both at home and at work
- be able to more accurately predict the actions and reactions of people you interact with
- learn how to motivate the people around you
- more effectively convince others of your point of view
- experience the world in higher resolution as you perceive through not only your perspective but the perspectives of those around you
- find it easier to deal with the negativity of others if you can better understand their motivations and fears
- calm yourself and accept the situation for what it is
- deal with resistance to change more effectively by addressing their point of view

There are many studies that link empathy to business results. They include studies that correlate empathy with increased sales, empathy with the performance of the best managers of product development teams, and empathy with enhanced performance in an increasingly diverse workforce. Some of these studies can be viewed on the website of The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations.

The Johnson and Johnson study (2001) specifically found that emotional competence differentiates successful leaders. It resulted in J&J developing an internal program for managers that provided emotional and social competencies as part of their skills development.

### **Conclusion**

In 2016, the most successful organisations are focusing on their disruptor technologies and products to ensure their success into the future. They are appointing project managers and development teams that understand the customer, and are able to empathise with their needs and wants.

Project teams work together to achieve outcomes for the greatest number of features at the lowest possible cost. To do this, and bring the team along on that ride, takes empathy.

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