

What does it truly mean to be Empathetic as a Leader?

Our communication has become more tortured in their plot, more fractured in their application and more ruptured in style. Yet we speak volumes on communication and its applications. Where is the empathy that everyone speaks about but so few rarely understand and still fewer apply?

So what is Empathy?

In essence it is a lot like the movie Inception – you have to transport yourself into the world, thoughts, feelings and emotions of another person – not for purposes of espionage but for purposes of the seemingly impossible task of „Understanding them!

In a recently concluded Leadership Training for the senior executives of a manufacturing firm, we conducted a role-play in which one person would be the manager and one of our facilitators would be his team member. The intent was to see the empathy that the manager displayed.

Team Member: I’ve had a bad six months sir, what with my divorce, the children, sorting out the house, finances....I need time off – a month at least to get back on track.

Response: Wow!! I did not know this was going on in your life!! Sure go ahead take time off, recuperate, and get back!!

The manager pushed his chair back and exited the role-play. His body language clearly displayed that he was happy with the way he handled the situation.

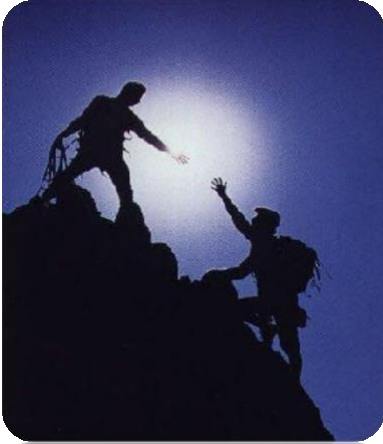
We asked the questions –“Did the manager connect to the reality of this person’s world?”

A heated discussion ensued and finally the consensus emerged -he spoke from „his shoes“, not from the „team member’s shoes“.

We repeated the role-play with two new volunteers and here was the response of the manager to the same situation:



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Manager: I see that you are really upset, disappointed and angry – I do understand what you are experiencing right now – sure you need time off – I can give you a full fifteen days off to rest, recuperate, introspect and rejuvenate – go ahead – don't worry about anything here – please do suggest a name from the team who can take on some of your responsibilities while you are away and I will take care of the rest! Do not hesitate to let me know if there is any way I can help.

"Empathy is about standing in someone else's shoes, feeling with his or her heart, seeing with his or her eyes. Not only is empathy hard to outsource and automate, but it makes the world a better place." - Daniel H. Pink

Empathy is the ability to abandon our reality and enter that of another when the situation calls for it. It is our ability to move seamlessly between both the realities – „ours and theirs“. Empathy, as a leadership characteristic, is not about saying "I understand" but truly understanding the worldview that the team member is coming from and having a „sense“ of what it is like to be in their world. Only then can a leader provide the assistance from a professional capacity that will enable the person to deal with or rise above their circumstances.

Author Bio:

Vikas Vinayachandran is a certified Coach and Leadership Facilitator. His ability to establish a deep connection with the participants gives him the unique skill to leave an indelible mark in the lives of his trainees. He has over 15 years of experience conducting training programs for various levels of management in Fortune 500 companies. He has an MBA from the prestigious Lancaster University Management School, UK.

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