

Diverse Thinking

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The Brain on Empathy



Think back over the past year: Did you ever open up to a colleague, and even though it appeared they were listening, there didn't seem to be any emotional resonance? Or how about a time when the person you were confiding in commiserated in your struggles, but then it became about *their* experience? Although the recent crises have emphasized the necessity—and power—of empathetic leadership, few people understand the nuance of healthy connection. That chasm has left many in the workplace feeling isolated, which in turn has cascaded into loneliness, depression, and a host of other mental health ailments.

Empathy is a complex expression. It isn't a matter of simply recognizing the hardships of others. Rather, empathy is a dynamic construct that can be measured and developed. Despite how commonplace the term has become, many managers don't have an appreciation for how difficult it can be to get right—or the consequences when it goes awry.

Unfortunately, most of us didn't learn the intricacies of

emotional regulation as kids, and business schools haven't yet added coursework on the brain chemistry of interpersonal connection. The upshot is that even the most earnest efforts at relationship building are likely to continue falling short. The good news, though, is that empathy is not an immutable trait. It can be cultivated.

Advanced imaging reveals that how and when we experience different emotions lights up different neural networks, which can determine how we respond. For instance, studies have shown that when someone is interrupted in the middle of a research task or asked to make a particularly quick decision, their ability to empathize is significantly diminished. At the same time, when a person is in a comfortable state, it's harder to feel for someone in distress. Those are important considerations for business leaders.

Empathy has three slightly—but crucially—different components:

Cognitive empathy lets us understand the emotional experience of others while maintaining a healthy detachment. It's the ability to intellectually walk in someone else's shoes.

Sympathy, or emotional empathy, lets us feel what another person is experiencing. This has value—but also limitations. Sympathy activates brain circuits in a way that the observer ends up feeling pain as if it were their own. So when suffering becomes too intense, we protect ourselves and put up barriers, reducing the likelihood of compassionate action.

Compassion, or empathetic care, manifests as concern *for* others. This form of empathy activates a set of brain regions involved in feelings of warmth, reward, and affiliation. Highly compassionate people are more capable of quieting the parts of their brain that focus on themselves, so that they can take helpful action.

Many conceptualizations of empathy turn out to be incomplete, focusing on one aspect over the others. But to be effectively empathetic, we need a combination of all of these components. Having pure sympathy isn't beneficial, as it can result in burnout, paradoxically shutting down the helping response. Meanwhile, cognitive empathy alone isn't ideal either, since it can make a person seem cold and callous. But together, sympathy and cognitive empathy *guide* compassion. That's where the magic—and compelling leadership—happens.

Deep connection takes place in the space between the two ends of the spectrum. Studies show that compassion increases connectivity between the right amygdala

and the prefrontal cortex, which increases the likelihood that someone will help others, even at a personal cost. In fact, research has found that people who actively practice compassion give almost twice as much away in resource-redistribution exercises as their unaffected colleagues. When it comes to relationships, this emotion is highly

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prosocial, reinforcing neural circuits that enable us to feel love. It helps to overcome distress, build resilience, and strengthen bonds.

Leaders must pay attention to the nuances of empathy. They must actively work to develop their interpersonal skills—and do so across all dimensions. It is essential to building deep, meaningful relationships and, in turn, loyalty. Think of empathy like aiming Cupid's arrow blindfolded: even with a good bow and a strong arm, neither does much good without a clear target. //

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