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Inc.

**Empathy: A Unique Skill  
That is Both Intuitive  
AND Needs to be  
Learned.**

One of the authors went for a medical exam:

The primary care physician sat behind her computer with the screen covering half her face. She glanced at her patient and said with no affect, “You are in danger of getting Type 2 Diabetes. You need to lose 25 pounds.”

The author remembers wondering why his insurance company was paying for this physician’s services: That same message could have been conveyed by email or on his Apple Watch.

The doctor’s dire warning made a profound impact for 24 hours. It was then forgotten.

This story illustrates the power of conveying information without empathy.

In *The Empathy Effect*, Helen Riess, M.D. mentions a survey asking physicians if they had initiated discussions about cancer risks with patients. More than 70% responded that they had.

And yet only 30% of their patients remember such a discussion.

Twenty percent of these patients were eventually diagnosed with cancer.

What is the lesson for leaders?

When communicate well, lives can be saved.

Communication is data plus empathy.

When leaders rely on the power of words and data alone, lives can be lost.

### **Empathy is a Leadership Issue at Your Company:**

One of the authors received the following note from a Stybel Peabody client discussing a direct report:

- X's affect is read negatively by colleagues and he struggles relating to people.
- X doesn't demonstrate engagement / empathy appropriate to the subject matter.
- X is having difficulty building a productive working relationship with a junior direct report who needs support.

This is a CEO.

The CEO believes empathy is a leadership issue. Is he correct?

In a 2015 survey of 160 companies, the top ten businesses with high levels of empathy generated 50 percent more net income per employee than the bottom ten.

A study conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital showed that patients who rated their physicians as empathetic also rated them as being more professionally competent than lower empathy-rated physicians.

It is a mistake to assume that being perceived as a competent leader requires stereotypical male behaviors of focusing on facts while ignoring emotion.

## **Male Ideals of Leadership**

### **May not Work Anymore.**

Writing in *Fast Company* magazine, the CEO of Big Four CPA Firm Deloitte titled his piece: “Nice-Guy Leaders Actually Finish First.” And one reason they

do so well is that they are able to express empathy with clients and team members. (Saltzberg, 2014).

## **Empathy Is Not Sympathy**

Dr. Riess is Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Director of the Empathy and Relational Science Program at Massachusetts General Hospital. She co-founded and serves as CEO/Chief Scientific Officer of a SaaS (software as a service company) called Empathetics, Inc.

It provides a cloud-based platform to train medical professionals and leaders in emphatic communication.

The term “empathy” did not come into existence until the early twentieth century.

It is derived from a German word meaning “feeling into”:

Suppose you look out your office window and see someone in a heavy downpour shivering with cold.

Sympathy is being cognitively aware that this person is uncomfortable without an emotional component.

Empathy, on the other hand, is feeling AS IF you are standing next to the person in the rain. You are experiencing their discomfort as if it was yours.

There is an emotional connection and yet:

You are aware that you are comfortably dry in your office.

Empathy is defined as “the ability to appreciate the other person’s feelings without being so emotionally involved that your judgment is affected.”

### **Empathy is Genetic, Yet.....**

Our bodies are programmed to be emphatic with those who are genetically like us:

Observe mothers and their infants.

They do not require empathy training!

Their bodies are genetically programmed to be empathic to small, beings who have genes like ours.

### **Empathy Meets a Diverse Workforce.**

It is easy to be emphatic towards people who share common genes. It also is easy to be empathic towards people who live in our community and who share common values.

Our genetic programming toward empathy has limits.

The emphatic response may not automatically generate when dealing with someone "different."

As the demographics of the United States becomes increasingly diverse and women take on more important leadership roles, working with people unlike us will become more common.

And we are not genetically programmed to have empathic reactions to people outside our gene pool who are "different."

Empathy is a unique attribute: it is genetically programmed in us and yet it must be learned as we confront an increasingly diverse employee population.

Empathy must be learned as our customers are increasingly "different" from us. Do not "assume" you have it simply because you know how to react

with empathy towards members of your family or immediate community.

### **Empathy towards others unlike us can be learned.**

Using a framework called “E.M.P.A.T.H.Y” ® Dr. Riess has been teaching physicians how to properly “read” their patients' emotional states and how to employ behavioral techniques to demonstrate emphatic behavior.

After her empathy-enhancing intervention, she found that the trained group of physicians received significantly higher patient satisfaction scores than a control group of physicians.

### **M is for Muscles of Facial Expression**

We recommend you read Dr. Riess' book or go to [empathetics.com](http://empathetics.com) to get a full sense of the “E.M.P.A.T.H.Y” ® framework.

In this post, we will focus on “M.”

Watch a mother with an infant toddler. When the child is smiling with delight, the mother's face will automatically mirror the child's face: the mouth will turn up into a smile and her eyebrows will rise. This



instinctive facial mirroring sends her child the following message:

“Your joy is my joy.”

When the child is crying, the mother’s mouth and eyebrows will turn down.

Mother is sending this message:

“Your pain is my pain.”

Compare this mirror technique with the following business scenario:

A subordinate comes by your open door and says with a grin, “I just closed that important sale today!”

Your head moves up and down in affirmation of the message. You might even comment, “Nice job.”

Your face, however, does not mirror your subordinate’s happiness.

You are looking grim because you were immersed in writing an email. Your subordinate interrupted you.

What happened?

Your words convey affirmation.

Your nonverbal message:

“You bother me.”

Which message do you think carries more weight for that employee?

### **Empathy Skills Are Worth Cultivating.**

Dr. Riess suggests that if you wish to be an effective leader in an increasingly diverse work world, empathy can be learned. Do not assume you naturally have empathy.

You are genetically programmed NOT to be empathic towards people who are different from you.

### **Empathy and Virtual Work.**

As more work is conducted online, how do leaders appropriately convey empathy in virtual settings?

One of our client COOs has a well-deserved reputation for empathy in one-on-one real-time settings. But much of her work is conducted online.

In conducting 360 interviews about her, we received complaints of negativity and disinterest among those had to deal with her using video links.

It turns out that staring at a tiny camera lens on her laptop for sixty minutes is boring!

As she got bored, she would move her eyes downward to examine notes or to check emails on her mobile device.

Participants observed the lack of eye contact and the furrowing of her brows. They interpreted the look as displeasure.

Whether displeasure or distraction, the message was the same: lack of empathy.

At our recommendation, this leader's daughter drew a child's picture of a funny eye on a yellow "Post It" note. It was placed next to the camera lens. The distracting mobile device was removed from sight.

**Make No Assumption.**

Leaders should not assume they have "natural" empathy. In professional settings, they probably do

not. Want to be a more effective leader? Start with learning empathy skills.

There is a secondary benefit: Expressing empathy towards others is the best way to get empathy from others.

## References

Riess, H. THE EMPATHY EFFECT: seven neuroscience-based keys for transforming the way we live, love, work, and connect across differences. (2018) Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Saltzberg, B. FAST COMPANY. “Five Reasons Why Nice-Guy Leaders Actually Finish First,” 2014. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3029121/5-reasons-nice-guy-leaders-actually-finish-first>

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**Stybel Peabody provides companies with “leadership and career success” for valued senior level talent. Core services include retained search (Board members, CEOs,**

**COOs, CFOs), leadership development coaching, and executive-level outplacement.**

**For a free 30-minute consult, contact:**

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