

The power of



empathy



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Empathy is a skill which can be learnt which could have far-reaching consequences for business. Psychotherapist and coach, **Anne Brockbank** explores the potential for workplace counsellors to develop empathy in managers

The workplace counsellor has been called 'the conscience of the organisation'¹ for good reasons. Corporate life, with its necessary emphasis on results, especially financial results, may nurture managers who are lacking in empathy. An overly rational managerial approach can undermine trust and honesty at work, when so often relationships would benefit from an injection of empathy. In this article I will present reasons to encourage managers to be empathic, explain how empathy can be used in the workplace, and suggest how counsellors may help develop this skill in managers. I have based this article on my research experience of shadowing retail managers, counselling clients on workplace issues, and training managers in a variety of organisations, as well as my contribution to MBA programmes.

Reasons for using empathy at work

A recent NICE report² identified the behaviour of managers as one of the significant factors in staff wellbeing and mental health. The 'duty of care' which is part of the managerial role, requires that managers are encouraged to behave in ways which support the psychological health of their staff. But how many managers really understand what this means and consider how they can provide such support?

Engagement of staff is known to influence the performance of an organisation in commercial terms. Engagement is defined as 'commitment to the organisation and its values'³. Engagement incorporates three dimensions: emotional or affective engagement, as well as intellectual and social engagement. This suggests that how employees feel about their work influences their level of engagement. Indeed where employees are engaged their affective engagement is higher than either their intellectual or social engagement⁴.

So there are good reasons to develop managerial behaviours which address another person's feelings as a priority. The workplace counsellor provides a powerful model of empathy in the organisation and we have the potential to play an influential role as change agents within them, which I will outline below.

Defining empathy

For many counsellors empathy is a given, and may be perceived as a quality rather than a skill. However, this article presents empathy as a skill which can be learnt and used in everyday situations, not just in therapy. There are three components necessary to communicate effective empathy:

- 1 Recognition of what someone is feeling which may be expressed, verbally or non-verbally
- 2 Understanding the reasons for their feelings in terms of their experience (and active listening will help here)
- 3 Responding in a way that communicates understanding (and this needs careful wording).

To summarise, empathy can be defined as; 'an understanding of the world from the other's point of view, their feelings, behaviour and experience and the communication to the other of that understanding in full.'^{5,6} The other person here may be an employee, colleague, friend or partner, as empathy is an interpersonal skill.

Empathy in business

For many the idea of empathy is just too 'touchy feely' for the business context, or indeed any context other than therapy. It is true that most of what is known about empathy comes from the world of therapy. There is a good reason for this: empathy is used in therapy to trigger the will to change and this is where it can be powerfully used in managing day-to-day life at work.

Empathy is used in management situations to:

- Support the relationship between manager and staff
- Acknowledge the reasons behind someone's behaviour or situation, and
- Calm their instinctive reactions to threatening change.

Relationship

An important factor in managing performance is the relationship between manager and staff. The manager and employee are not 'in a relationship', a term often used as code for 'having an affair' in today's world. Rather, they are collaborating in a professional enterprise for the benefit of the business. Managers need to be expert in their field and they also need expertise in creating good relationships with their staff. This is where empathy comes in.

A manager who offers empathy will have listened carefully and recognised the situation a staff member is in, as it is experienced by them. This important recognition is what is known as 'non-directive' as it begins from the employee's experience rather than the manager's.

Response

Neuroscience tells us that emotion dominates behaviour, although it seems this uncomfortable truth is largely denied in modern workplaces.^{7,8} Accessing the emotional brain is achieved through empathy and empathy can be part of the ordinary spoken exchange between a manager and their staff. This is the skill of empathy in action, and can be described as a day-to-day skill because anyone can do it and empathy can be learnt. Many people use empathy quite naturally, particularly women, who tend to be socialised to be responsive to feelings. There may be a tendency to dismiss dealing with feelings as 'a feminine skill' not needed in the corridors of power. Recent social, economic and political revelations in the UK may give us pause for thought on that point.

Empathy as intelligence

Author, Daniel Goleman's best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*⁹ offered an easy way of understanding that business success depended as much on emotional factors as on intellectual ones. It made a compelling case for saying that the ability to understand and manage yourself and to create rapport with others was an essential precursor to managing others. Empathy is amongst the skills that enable managers to take emotion on board and work effectively

with others. The messages of the book were radical at the time and in many ways they still are. It asks some potentially revealing questions such as:

- Do you know the impact you have on others?
- Can you manage your own feelings of anger and anxiety?
- Can you easily put yourself in another person's shoes?

Levels of empathy

The levels of empathy, first identified by authors, Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne in *Person centred counselling in Action*¹⁰ are important for managers to understand, as different levels of empathy are appropriate in different situations. They outline four levels of empathy:

- 1 **Zero empathy:** silence, giving advice, making judgments and asking questions
- 2 **Partial empathy:** responding to one identified feeling out of two or more
- 3 **Primary empathy:** responding to emotion or feeling based on verbal or non-verbal cues
- 4 **Advanced empathy:** responding based on a hunch or a guess or 'felt' sense of a feeling or feelings.

Understanding the difference in levels of empathy can be particularly helpful for those managers who are unsure about how to respond to emotional material. Managers may hesitate to use empathy with their staff as they may be wary of opening up emotional matters which are beyond their competence to deal with. They are very sensibly careful about getting into a therapeutic role. When line managers realise that in performance situations they can use partial empathy and, if necessary primary empathy, they can be confident of their competence. In *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A new theory of human cruelty*, Simon Baron-Cohen¹¹ provides a useful questionnaire for measuring empathy which can help counsellors working with managers in this way.

In many organisations the work culture tends to devalue feeling and emotion and staff may not express their feelings clearly or easily. Advanced empathy skills may be called for when staff are suppressing or denying what they are really feeling. This is particularly important when dealing with conflict, or when it is necessary to challenge or confront staff, as well as its traditional use in confidential counselling or mentoring sessions.

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Bringing empathy into the day-to-day

The counselling relationship can be an important place where the counsellor can help managers to use empathy in their day-to-day work in the following ways:

- **Modelling** – Model empathy in the counselling sessions and encourage managers to use it by naming it and reviewing positive outcomes when it is used by them
- **Training** – Offering empathy workshops
- **Coaching** – Including empathy in mentoring and coaching/training sessions
- **Developing organisational awareness** – Naming the skill as a competitive advantage when interacting with HR or the board.

How counsellors can help develop empathy

Modelling – At the conclusion of a series of counselling sessions the counsellor will normally review the work, revisit the presenting issues, and check progress. In addition they can identify the skills used in the sessions. Many clients report in a review session that they felt ‘heard’, ‘understood’ and ‘safe’. These responses can be linked to the empathy used by the counsellor and clients can take away their understanding of empathy. The review may also identify when managers have changed their own behaviour to include empathy and to highlight the positive impact achieved by this.

Training – The workplace counsellor is a key person to provide training within an organisation on interpersonal skills, or what is often known as ‘soft skills’. Suitable workshop themes may be:

- How to be empathic without risk
- The empathic manager, or
- Empathy at work.

Such trainings should include emotional vocabulary appropriate for each level of empathy.

Coaching – Where a mentoring or coaching programme is offered to senior managers, empathy can be presented as a competitive advantage for the organisation. Empathy is part of the skill-set essential for any mentor/coach and there is no shame in learning this as part of the process.

Developing organisational awareness – The workplace counsellor can be bold in offering empathy to policy makers when appropriate, for example, with HR decision makers. Responding to HR frustration and concerns with empathy, calling attention to the skill, and suggesting ideas to develop empathy at senior levels.

Conclusion

Management development programmes could usefully include the day-to-day skill of empathy as part of management training. Where managers are encouraged to coach their staff, empathy is a key element in successful coaching because of the importance of emotion in any human change or learning. Programmes to prepare coaches or mentors are ideal situations to develop empathic senior managers. Empathy can be part of the day-to-day interactions at work when managers have the vocabulary and confidence to use it at the right level.

The workplace counsellor can be influential as change agents at all these levels, in their one-to-one contact with individuals, in their collaborative training with HR, and in their personal interactions with policy makers. The organisation is known to gain competitive advantage by encouraging empathy as it affects all aspects of the business¹².

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