**Abstract**

A recent study has documented a sharp decrease in the capacity for empathy in college aged students. Recognizing the value of empathy, and the documented evidence of the value of empathy in management and leadership, this session is designed for faculty of undergraduate, graduate, and executive classrooms, to reflect deeply on their own experiences of empathy and together identify ways that they can bring experiential and other exercises into their management classrooms.

**Introduction**

This session utilizes deep reflection, free writing, and exploration of individual’s experience of empathy, and a particular time when one became distinctly aware of a shift of perspective, new insights, and a sense that they understood the emotions and unique perspective of another. Empathy is a component of emotional intelligence, and the capacity for empathetic responses is central to building relationships, managing people, crafting public policy, effective leadership, building teams, and many other important tasks in the area of management.

A recent study of college students using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) showed that there has been a sharp decline in empathy, while another study which sought responses from undergraduate business students on the relative importance of ten leadership qualities, and they rated empathy as the least important. Meanwhile management and leadership scholars are finding that empathy is needed more and more in leaders, and there is a high correlation between the capacity for empathy and effective leadership.

The purpose of this session is to reflect deeply on our own experiences of empathy as a dynamic process, and to bring experiential and other activities into the management classroom to help build students’ empathic capacities.

**Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications**

A recent study of nearly 14,000 students showed that empathy, as measured by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), is declining. The average level of the IRI subscale Empathic Concern, meaning people’s feelings of sympathy for the misfortunes of others, dropped most sharply, declining by 48 percent between 1979 and 2009. During the same period, the IRI subscale Perspective Taking, people’s tendencies to imagine others’ points of view, decreased by 34 percent. The declines are most pronounced between 2000 and 2009. (Konrath, O’Brien and Hsing, 2010)

Another study (Holt, Marques, Hu and Wood, 2017) found that when undergraduate business students were asked to rate ten leadership qualities, empathy consistently scored as the least important factor for leadership success.

The results of those studies are disturbing because empathy has been linked to a variety of management concerns.

McKee (2016) points out that empathy is an important component of emotional intelligence and an essential leadership skill. Wilson III (2015) surveyed business leaders to discover which attributes they believed executives must have to succeed in today’s digital, global economy. Of the five critical attributes identified, empathy was highlighted as the most important by executives. In an interview with Kathy Caprino (2016), Richard S. Wellins, Ph.D., Senior Vice President of Development Dimensions International (DDI) stated:

In great part, the ability of a leader to empathize impacts employee engagement, retention and performance. It is critical to good teamwork. It helps fuel customer-centric innovation. Our own research revealed that the correlation between empathy and leadership performance was stronger than any other skill. Our own research revealed that the correlation between empathy and leadership performance was stronger than any other skill.

Yet DDI’s research showed that only about 40 percent of leaders assessed were proficient in empathy. And as leaders rise through the ranks, it gets worse (Caprino, 2016).

Empathy is also believed to be essential for ethical decision-making (Baer, 2017; Hess, Beever, Strobel and Brightman, 2017; Agosta, IEP). Baker (2017) advocates challenging students to consider the role that empathy plays in their own decisions and to consider the relationship between empathic concern and decision making in business.

Given the declining levels of empathy in our students, and the importance of empathy to various aspects of management, we believe that it is important to provide students with opportunities to develop their own empathic skills in the classroom.

**Learning Objectives**

* To foster personal reflection
* To explore ways of incorporating empathic development in the classroom
* To link the value of empathy to specific course topics

**Session Description**

This highly interactive session is designed to engage participants experientially as well as intellectually. In keeping with the topic of empathy, participants will be led in an exercise where they identify and reflect on a specific experience they have had where they *suddenly* felt they were able to understand the emotions and the unique perspective of another.

The main activity involves silent reflection and a writing exercise. The act of reflecting is central to building a capacity for empathy, and an activity that is often avoided in the busy stream of events in the student’s life, and most people’s lives. By viewing empathy as a process, this session provides the opportunity for instructors to refresh their own experiences and capacity for empathy. In the final 15 minutes of the session, participants have the opportunity to share their ideas for new teaching techniques that can connect the concept and experience of empathy to courses that they teach.

**Detail of Activities and Timeline**

* Welcome and opening question: “What drew you to this session?” (10 minutes)
* Presentation of research indicating the decline of empathy in college-age students (10 minutes)
* Interactive discussion of the definition of empathy and the dimensions of empathic behavior (intellectual and affective); consideration of empathy as a process (search, sort, interpret). Participants are invited to add any elements that they feel relevant and important to one’s ability to feel empathy for another. (10 Minutes)
* Introduction of the Activity: participants are given 5 minutes to reflect on their personal experiences, and identify one specific experience where they suddenly felt that they understood the perspective of another, and could understand the other’s feelings. In this reflection, participants are encouraged to think of the context, to go back to that time in their mind, and note what happened before this awareness, the details of any interaction that brought about this sense of awareness, the feelings and significance of the insights into the feelings of another. After silent reflection, we ask participants to write for 5 minutes, noting as much detail as possible about the specific experience that they identified—what was happening before, the process, specific insights, and the broader context. We suggest this writing process be done by stream of consciousness, by putting pen to paper and continuously writing without stopping for the 5 minutes. (10 minutes)
* Sharing in Dyads: Participants move into pairs, and share with each other their experience with as much detail and texture as possible. (10 minutes)
* Full group discussion: Presenters ask members of the dyads what they noticed about their partner’s experience. Participant comments are posted on white board or flip charts. Some prompt questions, if needed: what was happening immediately before the new insight, understanding, and feeling of empathy? What was this experience like? How did their feelings towards the other shift? What was different after this shift to feelings of empathy? (15 minutes)
* Sharing out with the group: We will post elements noted by participants as antecedents or elements that made their experience particularly powerful, engaging participants to see if there are any commonalities, themes, or particularly powerful descriptions of the empathic experience. (10 minutes)
* Large group discussion: Think of a course that you teach for which the capacity of empathy is relevant, and share ideas of how you might add or amend an assignment or classroom session to help students to both understand the concept of empathy and to experience empathy in some way. (Example: we often use case studies in management education, but emphasize strategic analysis of these cases. After the strategic analysis, have the students take roles of the various stakeholders in the case and role play a discussion of taking actions, recognizing tensions and different interests of the stakeholders. Then ask them how it felt to be in that role, to defend a decision, to follow through and implement a strategy, etc.) Additional Discussion Question: How do we model empathy in our classrooms? (15 minutes)

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