

EMPATHY MAP ACTIVITY

Building EQ Competency in Students with an Empathy Map

Abstract

This session provides an opportunity to experience an activity I use to build empathy in my students. This activity helps students understand not only how to improve their empathetic skills but also illustrates the importance of having high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence when managing employees. I will first introduce the activity and reasoning behind it; next, session participants will be invited to work through the activity in breakout groups much as students would do; finally, we would regroup as a whole to debrief and discuss the use of this activity in the participants' teaching settings.

Keywords

Empathy, emotional intelligence, activity

Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EQ), as a concept or topic, is now widely included in management and/or leadership courses. However, it is often taught just as a static concept to be learned rather than as a set of competencies to be developed or improved. The activity described and demonstrated in this session provides a powerful tool that students can use not only in the classroom, but in their future work careers as well, to help build a key skill component of EQ – that of empathy.

From a pedagogical perspective, this activity is easily adaptable to student audiences and modalities of instructional delivery. I have used this activity successfully with MBA students and with sophomores taking Principles of Management. This activity can also be used both in-person and online. Students do need to be arranged in groups of 3-5 for this activity, so if synchronous online teaching is the modality, a feature such as Zoom's breakout rooms would be essential in order to create the separate student groups.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Salovey and Mayer (1990) originally conceptualized emotional intelligence, but it was the psychologist Daniel Goleman (1998) that popularized EQ by presenting it as a competency model of skills that could be developed. Subsequent research over the past two decades has provided strong evidence for the predictive power of EQ on leader performance (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009) and employee retention (Korn Ferry Institute, 2018). More specifically, leaders who demonstrate a high level of empathy, a core component in EQ, have been shown to outperform in areas of engagement, decision-making, and coaching (DDI 2016). Unfortunately, in one recent study of over 15,000 leaders worldwide, only about 40% of front-line leaders were

deemed proficient or strong in empathy (DDI, 2016). Therefore, as there is wide consensus that EQ, and in particular, empathy, is a critical set of competencies for managers and leaders, we should do more than just introduce the concept in the classroom; we should provide opportunities for our students to actively develop and build their EQ competencies. The empathy map activity described in this session provides such an opportunity.

Originally developed over a decade ago as a visualization tool in Design Thinking (Gray, 2009), the Empathy Map exercise has also been adopted for use in product development and marketing to better improve the customer experience (Gray, 2017). More recently, scholars (Cairns, et al., 2020) have published results from a study regarding medical students' perceived value in using the Empathy Map exercise to build communication skills with patients in health-care settings. I have also found, anecdotally, that my own students find great value in this exercise. Some of the comments my Principles of Management students have provided about this exercise include the following:

My biggest take-away from the activities of the week was the way the empathy map can shape how we interact and empathize with people in the workplace. The activity where we had to ask someone questions to fill out an empathy map proved how important it is to communicate with other people you work with to fully understand their motives. Without truly empathizing with someone, you fail to see why they do the things they do, which can cause miscommunication in a business for sure.

My biggest take-away from this week's topic is the importance of the empathy map. We are all different from one another and may have different goals or beliefs. That doesn't mean you can't listen and understand someone else's opinion. It will show them that you care. This is important for the work field for people to be able to trust you.

My biggest take away this week was the empathy map. Especially if you are managing people, learning how to relate and empathize with someone is an important part if you want that positive relationship with an employee.

My biggest takeaway was the idea that empathy can be taught, because I thought it was an inherit ability and quantity in people.

One of my MBA students in Jakarta, Indonesia, a Vice President of a metal roof manufacturer with 900 employees, provided the following commentary:

I am amazed of how simple yet powerful the tool is. After a session of asking questions, group members have more understanding of one another's thoughts. I realize the importance of not assuming that we know how or what one thinks. Most of the time, it is better to ask the right questions to find out about other people and what they think or feel. Empathy map is one of the significant new idea that I learned in this module. I intend to use it as a tool to build teams with EQ. As a leader I deal with individuals and teams, and this tool can be used to get an overview of the team's emotional landscape.

Learning Objectives

Upon conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

- Describe the value of empathy in managing and interacting with employees
- Demonstrate active listening skills
- Understand that empathy is a skill that can be learned

Exercise Overview

I use this exercise after introducing the concept of Emotional Intelligence through a lecture format. During the lecture, I also highlight the critical importance of empathy. Once my lecture is complete, I have students form groups of 3-5, and depending on the modality of delivery, either hand out a paper copy of the Appendix, or have students download a soft copy from their online course room. Each group only needs one copy.

Once students are in their groups, I tell them that one group member needs to volunteer to be the person “being mapped”, and this volunteer needs to think about a current goal that they have in their life. I advise students they do not have to share a private goal; it could be a goal about study habits, sports achievement, academic achievement, to name a few examples. The other students in the group will then use the Empathy Map, starting with Section 1 (Who are we empathizing with?), and going through the sections sequentially, and to use the question prompts

in each section to learn more about the person being mapped (Section 1) and the goal they are seeking to achieve (Section 2). Sections 3-6 relate more to observable phenomena on the part of the person being mapped (see/say/do/hear). The final two sections focus on non-observable phenomena (think/feel); these two sections are covered last, as it is found that trust and comfort is built through first focusing on the observable phenomena. These sections are designed to help students see a particular goal from the perspective of the “mapped” student; while students may share similar goals (e.g. academic achievement), the experiences of striving for those goals may be remarkably different.

Students are provided with 20-30 minutes to go through this activity and are instructed to write down notes in each section on the map as based on what information is shared by the “mapped” student. Once the groups have completed all of the Empathy Map sections, I ask them, still in groups, to reflect on the following questions:

1. How could a leader use an empathy map to refine his or her leadership skills?
2. Why do you think the sections are ordered as they are in the Empathy Map? For example, would the student being “mapped” have felt as comfortable if you first asked questions from section 7?
3. What have we learned here that can help us build and retain trust among teams?

Once the groups have discussed these questions, I bring the class back together and lead a discussion through these questions and other observations the students wish to share.

Session Description

During the MOBTS conference session, I would first introduce the activity through a short lecture presentation, also providing the theoretical background as to why it is critical to develop empathy in managers. I would explain the process by which I use the activity in class. I would cover this first part of the session in no more than 10-15 minutes.

Next, I would ask session attendees to form groups of 3-5 so they could actually experience how the activity is used by students. If we have the ability to sort session participants into breakout rooms while on the virtual conference that would be ideal; if that capability is not available, I would ask for volunteers among the session attendees to form one group that would be observed by all other attendees while on the conference call. I would have the groups work through the exercise just as students would do so; one attendee would be “mapped”, while the others in the group would use the question prompts to work through the sections of the map. This part of the session should take 20-25 minutes.

For the last part of the session, I would have attendees rejoin as one large group, and open up a discussion of their initial impressions and observations, of how the activity could be used in their own teaching, and if there are any suggestions for refinement or improvement of the activity. I would ask attendees to not only provide their responses to the discussion prompts I use with students but would also ask they provide other ideas for debriefing with students. I would also share typical responses from my own students. As I envision this being a 60-minute session, this discussion period would last for the remainder of the session – ideally, for a period of 20 minutes or so to ensure all ideas, questions, and impressions are shared.

References

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Appendix – Empathy Map Activity Sheet

