

The good news on empathy

Empathy is becoming even more important in our disconnected world. Now, new research shows how we can all get better at relating

BY HELEN LAMMERS-HELPS

We tend to live immersed in bubbles made up of people who look like us, think like us, and behave like us. And it's getting worse. As more and more of our communications move to the digital world, we become increasingly detached from one another and unable to appreciate another's viewpoint if different from our own.

This detachment results in a lack of empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Empathy enables us to connect with others in a meaningful way and it has many positive benefits, like reducing stress and also fostering resilience, trust and creativity.

Pam Paquet, a psychologist and business coach in Chilliwack, B.C., says empathy is an important quality for good leaders although it's usually referred to in business circles as the leader's Emotional Quotient or EQ.

"When leaders or owners have a sense or have intuition as to how people are doing, they will do much better," says Paquet. "A good leader listens, is approachable, is considerate... they have a sense of how their staff is doing. They care and are willing to help."

Not feeling listened to is a common complaint on employee engagement surveys, continues Paquet. "If people seem to quit out of the blue, it's a sign the leadership wasn't approachable."

Employees don't leave workplaces, they leave managers, adds Paquet. Poor leadership will permeate every aspect of the business and the resulting frustration makes it more difficult for your team to finish tasks and meet targets. "Managers need to communicate from a place of respect, rather than talking down to employees."

Little things like using a person's name, watching body language for clues and using manners (please, thank you, and sorry) will go a long way, says Paquet.

But you must be genuine, even if that takes effort in the early days. There's no point in faking it. Everyone will know if you are insincere.

Although Paquet is reluctant to feed into stereotypes, she says women do tend to have a higher EQ. "They tend to be more intuitive, caring, nurturing... to have an inkling of what's up and nip it in the bud before it snowballs."

And while empathy is a core competency and critical skill for leaders, the research is clear that empathy makes all of us better co-workers, friends, neighbours, and family members.

The good news is that while some people are naturally more empathetic, there is evidence that empathy and emotional intelligence can be learned.

An award-winning Canadian program has been proven to inspire empathy and pro-social behaviour in children.

Founded by Mary Gordon more than 20 years ago in Toronto, the Roots of Empathy program is now used in 3,000 schools across Canada and has spread to 13 countries worldwide.

In this unique homegrown program, a mother or father and their young baby visit an elementary school classroom several times during the year. The children are encouraged by a trained instructor to observe the baby. They are coached to take the baby's perspective, Gordon explains.

As a result, she says, "they develop emotional literacy in a practical way, with experiential learning, the deepest kind of learning."

"The children become astute at reading emotional cues, which helps them understand their friends and themselves too. They are able to talk about negative emotions through the lens of the baby, which makes it safe for everyone."

There is hard evidence that Roots of Empathy is effective. The program has been researched on three

Show you are really listening*

*From psychologist Pam Paquet

- Give the conversation your complete attention (no cell phone, emails, watching tv, etc.).
- Make eye contact when listening.
- Give verbal and non-verbal clues you are listening (head nod, say "uh huh," change facial expressions, etc.).
- Make statements that confirm you "get it" (that must be frustrating, that sounds really difficult, how did you cope with that, etc.).
- Ask questions at the end of the interaction such as: "How can I help," "What can I do?" and "Is there some way for me to assist?" Such questions will demonstrate empathy and genuine concern.

continents, says Gordon, and everywhere the conclusions have been the same. “There is a change in the ecosystem of the classroom,” she says. “The children are more respectful, kinder, more helpful... there’s less aggression and less bullying.”

This arm’s-length research has appeared in peer-reviewed journals, says Gordon.

The impact of the program goes far beyond the classroom, she adds. The positive effects spread to the hallways, washrooms, and playgrounds, and have been shown to last for years

The program also helps to break the cycle of intergenerational violence.

It was when working with families experiencing domestic abuse and neglect that Gordon first got the idea to create the novel Roots of Empathy program all those years ago. She had noticed that the common thread amongst these troubled families was an absence of empathy.

“Empathy develops in the relationship between the baby and the caregiver. If, for whatever reason, the parent isn’t able to be responsive and the baby doesn’t feel well protected, then there will not be a secure attachment,” she says.

There is no shortage of volunteer families for the program. “People hear what a beautiful experience it is and how special parents feel that their love of their baby is helping kids to learn to regulate their emotions,” she says.

The value of the Roots of Empathy program has been recognized with many awards including the 2018 Governor General’s Innovation Award set up to recognize trailblazers and creators who contribute to Canada’s success, and who inspire the next generation by building an inclusive, compassionate society.

Earlier this year, Roots of Empathy was chosen as one of 100 most inspiring social

innovations of the year world-wide by the Finnish education organization, HundrED.

Empathy is our ability to understand how another person feels and to be able to feel with them, says Gordon. “We can’t relate to another person without empathy. We can’t have conflict resolution or peace without empathy.”

“Empathy is what defines our humanity,” she summarizes. It is essential for building a sustainable society. “If we are educating children who read well, and compute well, but can’t relate, we will have a failed society.” **CG**

Resources

To learn more about the Roots of Empathy program, see the videos at:

- www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05vpw3f
- www.youtube.com/user/rootsofempathy

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