The Human Side of Programming: Empathetic Leaders Build Better Teams.

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ABSTRACT

People management is an important aspect of project management. Motivation and passion of team members play a key role in the success of a project. An empathetic leader can understand the emotional needs of the team better, to keep members motivated and productive. Employees who are emotionally satisfied will work harder and are more likely to stay put. In turn, companies will benefit from the members with higher productivity and lower turnover.

Besides productivity, compassion also drives innovation. If employees are concerned about the potential consequence of their mistakes, they may feel hesitant to take risks and to derive new solutions. An open environment encourages innovation and experimentation, without fear of failure.

Like any other skills, empathy can be developed by constant practice. In this paper, we would like to share ways in which one can identify areas for improvement for an employee while creating a safe environment where he/she can open up and feel free to share, and also to provide recommendations on how to practice empathy to help the member to improve further.

Practicing empathy will help to bring the team together and also creates an engaging and active environment that can churn out high-quality deliverables, driving the company's mission and future.

INTRODUCTION

According to Jessica Pryce-Jones (Pryce-Jones, 2010), workers will spend an average of 90,000 hours at work in their lifetimes. This amounts to nearly 1/6th of the life span of an average human (~60 years). Being a social animal, the typical employee would have numerous and varied workplace relationships. Key among these is the relationship with their manager. Employees more likely respond to an empathetic boss and will go an extra mile to get things done. Empathy is the ability to 'feel with' another person, to identity with them and sense what they're experiencing. In other words, empathy is seen as a cognitive ability, along the same lines as the ability to imagine future scenarios or to solve problems based on previous experience.

In this paper, we would like to discuss how to cultivate the skill of empathy and use it to build a team that is both passionate and loyal. We emphasize what Oprah Winfrey says:

> *"Leadership is about empathy. It is about having the ability to relate to and connect with people for the purpose of inspiring and empowering their lives."*

EMPATHY: A CLOSER LOOK

Often, in the language of businesses and organizations, empathy is confused with sympathy. A sympathetic connection happens when people relate the feelings and thoughts that others share to times when they, themselves, experienced those feelings and thoughts. Sympathy can create connection between people, but it's different from empathic connection, where the focus is solely on the other person. Empathy is understanding where another person is coming from and is a more practical and effective basis for collaborating within a team, and connecting with customers (Miyashiro , The Empathy Factor: Your Competitive Advantage for Personal, Team, and Business Success, 2011).

As famously stated in Dr. Brené Brown's words, "Often when people are facing a challenge or dealing with a difficult situation, they aren't looking for a magic response that will fix everything. They may be looking for someone who can help them feel like they aren't alone in solving the problem. They may be looking for someone who has been through a process or challenge before. They are definitely looking for a connection, and that's what empathy is all about" (Brown, 2010).

WHY SHOULD LEADERS EMBRACE EMPATHY?

Empathy is important today as a component of leadership for at least three reasons: the increasing use of teams; rapid globalization of organizations; and the growing need to retain talent. Marie R. Miyashiro (Miyashiro , The Empathy Factor: Your Competitive Advantage for Personal, Team, and Business Success, 2011), explains in her article on "Needs-Based Leaders" that effective leaders are typically skilled in empathy at the following two levels (Miyashiro, Needs-Based Leaders, 2012).

INTRAPERSONAL: KNOW THYSELF

The first step into the world of empathy is the most obvious and is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi:

"I need to become the change that I want to see in the world".

Needs run far deeper than wishes, wants or requests. They are also powerful motivators, and a need can be for integrity, progress, meaning or even joy at work. When one embraces empathy as a need, one can strive to become a leader of one's own mind, where one is less triggered by what he/she hears or sees around oneself.

Meditation is a powerful ally in developing self-awareness. It will help one to become aware of one's own feelings, which will help to discern the needs they indicate. When one is more aware of oneself and one's own feelings, then he/she can have a steady reference point within oneself- a compass by which to navigate to change.

INTERPERSONAL: KNOW THY NEIGHBOUR

The interpersonal is the next level, where one engages with one's team. Connecting with your teammates and seeing what is going on for them and being someone who cares about the human side of the equation are attributes of genuine leaders. Empathy matters because when leaders demonstrate compassion and willingness to not just understand, but to actively help their teammates through good times and bad, employees will most likely be more productive. Creating an emotionally safe atmosphere can make the team members take the risks to experiment and arrive at innovative solutions.

A team leader who can discern the feelings and see the actual need behind the request can create mutual respect and trust with their team members. One does not need to be best buddies, but knowing their staff's personality outside their work life would help the leader to take the first step towards a stronger relationship. Having a lunch with them or attending office social gatherings are a few examples of how leaders can start to get to know their staff better. One does not need to spy on their lives but endeavor to get to the level where the employee can reach out to one in a time of need without worrying about the consequences.

An effective leader empowers his employees by appreciating the impact of their accomplishments, thus making them want to accomplish more, and helping them to realize their full potential. What empowers one employee may not empower another. Here, tuning into an individual employee's personality and needs will enable a manager to genuinely support his/her employees and build quality relationships. By empowering and coaching the employees to be their best version, a manager sets the stage to allow them to effectively lead, help problem solve, train and develop other employees.

In 1998, Daniel Goleman, a renowned expert on emotional intelligence, calls emotional intelligence "the sine qua non" (an indispensable element) of leadership and lists empathy as one of its five components (Goleman, 1998). A leader has an important role to project a shared understanding of the organization's identity and its life-affirming purpose. For the employees to band together and embrace the purpose of the organization, they should have a sense of belonging and trust that can only be nurtured by empathy. Patnaik and Pete Mortensen share many case studies from Nike, IBM, Microsoft Xbox, Harley-Davidson, and others to show how using empathy can lead to more employee engagement, valuable customer feedback, and eventually increased revenues (Miyashiro , The Empathy Factor: Your Competitive Advantage for Personal, Team, and Business Success, 2011).

Empathy also plays a vital role in the retention of talent, particularly in today's fast growing economy where employees have multiple options. Leaders have always needed empathy to develop and keep good people, but today the stakes are much higher. When good people leave, they take the company's knowledge with them, and it further costs time and money to train the replacement.

CONCLUSION

An effective leader should acquire and cultivate the skill of empathy to build a team that is both loyal and productive. When the leaders and the organizations they dwell in embrace empathy and project it on their employees and customers, they create a lasting trust and bond, which enables the organization to cohesively march together to execute their core mission.

> *"If your emotional intelligence abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness……if you don't have empathy…then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far."*
>
> *- Daniel Goleman*

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RECOMMENDED READING

- *Search Inside Yourself*
- *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It.*
- *Applied Empathy: The New Language of Leadership*

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