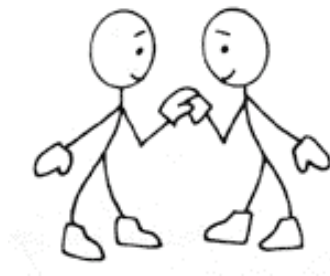


DEVELOPING EMPATHY: A LOST CAUSE?

By Sebastien Henry, Executive Coach & Trainer
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As a leader, have you ever had several people telling you that you should develop more empathy, that is, become better at understanding people's emotions? Perhaps you even received this feedback from a 360-degree assessment, and this came as a shock to you. If so, **you were probably left wondering how to develop empathy.**

This question is of course at the heart of Emotional Intelligence, and there is no easy answer. A lot of research in the field of neuro-sciences suggests that our level of empathy is determined by the structure of our brain. For example, people who have lesions in certain areas of the brain lose any empathy. There is also growing evidence that autism, characterized by a severe lack of empathy, has a physiological origin as well.

Some people seem naturally good at empathizing, and some others absolutely hopeless. So is **developing empathy a lost cause?**

From my experience working with leaders, my own answer to this question is: **developing empathy is not an easy ride, but some significant progress is possible through consistent effort and discipline.**

And it all starts from an unexpected place: your beliefs about empathy. **Many leaders I work with believe deep inside that developing empathy will somehow bring them more trouble.** By becoming too attuned to their people's feelings, they would end up being too "soft", and lose the decisiveness in their leadership style. This belief may not be very conscious, but it can be uncovered pretty rapidly through a conversation. Of course, with such a belief, any effort to develop empathy is doomed to failure. Why succeed in developing a trait that will bring more trouble?

So developing empathy starts with checking your own beliefs. If you have this belief that developing empathy will eventually impair your leadership, I encourage you to consider that **being highly empathetic is fully compatible with being very enforcing and decisive.** In other words, there is definitely a way to be empathetic

and at the same time to make tough decisions. For some familiar with the Harrison Assessment, this combination is called “compassionate enforcing”.

I have dedicated a whole chapter about how to achieve this combination in my forthcoming book, and you will hear more about it in the coming months.

For now, let’s assume that you are convinced that developing empathy is going to serve you well as a leader. You are just wondering how to do it.

Basically, **there are three simple ways.**

The first one was not my favorite, but a book I read recently makes a good case for it, and sparked some new determination to reconsider it. In his very interesting book called a “A Whole New Mind”, author Daniel Pink suggests that we develop our empathy by **becoming more skillful at reading emotions from the faces (and more generally bodies) of people we interact with.** He refers to the work by Paul Ekman, author of “Emotions Revealed”. This book is a classic on deciphering emotions on someone’s face. If you like the book, there are also two interactive CD-ROM tutorials that are, according to Daniel Pink, fascinating. To learn more about Paul Ekman’s work, you can check www.paulekman.com.

The second way is to grow awareness about our own emotions by **keeping an “emotions log”.** This means making the effort to keep a daily record of emotions we experience, so that we can both **uncover patterns and appreciate the immense variety of emotional nuances.** How does that contribute to increase empathy? By becoming familiar with our own emotional landscape, we also become more sensitive to emotions in others. “If my emotional inner world is so rich, it should be the same in others” becomes the underlying thought, and our emotional radar gets more precise. Keeping an “emotions log” can be done in five minutes a day, and is definitely a good investment.

The third way is to make it a habit to **be an explorer of emotions, that is, asking your people to share with you their emotions.** The first and second ways were about guessing people's emotions, but here we take a shortcut. After all, the best way to understand how people feel is to ask them! It is certainly not common in Asia, where emotions tend to be kept private and getting honest replies certainly requires a lot of trust, which you can develop by consistently caring for your people and developing your empathy for their benefit as well as yours. Then, making it a habit to genuinely "explore" their emotional landscape, you will be rewarded beyond your expectations. But don't be satisfied with answers like "I am fine" or "I am OK". Be more curious. Remember that there is a fascinating emotional landscape, like a Japanese garden, in each of us. "Tell me more, I am truly interested in how you feel" is the key to developing empathy.

I hope that you will enjoy these three ways to developing your empathy. None of them takes a lot of time (at least not the last two). But they all require persistence and discipline.

Warmly,
Sebastien



Sebastien Henry is **Progress-U's expert for Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and stress management**. He works with executives who want to:

- avoid feeling exhausted and uprooted as their career takes them to the top;
- become more inspiring leaders by developing their Emotional Intelligence (EQ) at work; and, as a consequence
- be able to motivate their people more and retain the best.

Having worked in an Asia-Pacific regional position at a multinational company, Sebastien has experimented extensively on how to develop Emotional Intelligence in his daily work life. He is currently writing a book on this topic. His articles on Emotional Intelligence in Leadership have been published in Human Resources and South China Morning Post.

He firmly believes in action, and the tools he uses and shares are derived from several areas of his life: his business experience as a corporate executive, of course, but also his intensive practice of mountaineering and rock climbing (7a on-sight and more than 50 alpine routes), his commitment to teach and coach prisoners, and his daily meditations for more than six years.

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Credentials:

- MBA, BA in Psychology, BA in Philosophy
- Certified NLP Practitioner and Master Practitioner
- Certified NLP Trainer (NLPU, USA)
- Certified Coach (ICC)
- More than 40 days of training with the Gestalt approach at the Paris School of Gestalt
- Certified Trainer of the "EQ Impact Learning" program (Talentsmart, USA)

Services offered: 1:1 Executive Coaching, Group Seminars and Workshops, Key Note Speeches