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Empathy: A Gateway to Objectivity in Leadership

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Most leaders have learned along the way that empathy is a critical leadership skill but few have an understanding of why. Empathy is a form of attention that goes beyond the intellect and involves directly sensing what it is like to be in someone else's shoes. How do we do this?

We sense what other people are experiencing or feeling by sensations that arise in our own bodies. All of us are like walking antennas, receiving and registering the felt experience of those around us. Some of us are better at this than others. To accurately register this kind of information requires being in touch with our own emotional responses. To be in touch with our own emotion, we have to be in touch with the physical sensations in our body. For example, I know that I am fearful because my heart rate begins to speed up, my stomach clenches, and my hair stands on end.

Recent research in cognitive neuroscience found that people with high emotional intelligence have significant activity in two areas of the brain -- the insula and the anterior cingulate cortex. Both of these regions -- which are critical centers of emotional awareness -- are also the aspects of the brain that attend to "interoception," or the ability to attend to physical sensations that arise within the body. Hugo Critchely, a researcher at the Institute for Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London found that people who scored high on a scale measuring empathy had high degrees of "visceral" awareness. For example, they were capable of tracking their heartbeat much more accurately than people with average or low levels of empathy.

The trick is to discern when "our" feelings are actually our own, and when we have inadvertently absorbed the feelings and reactions of the people around us. It is possible, for example, to be *overly* empathic, entering the world of another so fully that we lose touch with ourselves. On the contrary, when we *lack* empathy we have often shut down our built-in antenna, blocking the physical sensations that register emotion. As a result, we lose the ability to have an objective read on what is going on with the people around us.

Empathy is the linchpin between compassion, which arises from the heart, and understanding, which arises from the mind. There is no understanding of others without compassion. So, too, there is not compassion without understanding. When we perceive others *without* compassion, judgment arises. We usually assume that we are an impartial judge. However, to be truly impartial requires understanding. True understanding is informed by empathy. As we respond with empathy, compassion inevitably arises. This doesn't mean that our judgment is *clouded* by emotion, but rather that it is *informed* by emotion. Here's an example of this: I gather my direct reports together to talk about the strategic direction of our department. I have organized my notes and written my agenda. I walk into the meeting and begin to lay out the plan. I am unaware that people are angry because they were not given a chance to offer their perspective. They have concerns that are weighing heavily on their minds, and they feel undervalued because their input was not sought. How will I know this as a leader? If I am attached to my agenda and asleep to the moment, I may never know. Or, if I lack empathy, I may think, "that was a *great* meeting," or worse, "people are *so* pissy." But if I am watching what is actually unfolding I will sense that something is amiss, that people are out of sorts. My empathic capacity is stirred, and if I am a good leader I will inquire without judgment, perhaps naming what I sense to be true. And I will listen without judgment. I may or may not rewrite my plan. I may or may not have the luxury of inviting their input at this point into the process. But at the very least I will read the situation correctly, capable of responding more effectively, and with greater objectivity. With empathy serving as a gateway to understanding and compassion, I am able to address the reality of the situation as opposed to plowing through, imposing my agenda, and leaving people demoralized and angry.