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# Thought Papers from Brookings Executive Education

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## **Why Empathetic Leadership Matters**

by Paul Paese, Ph.D.

When I'm asked about the power of empathy, I answer with a quote from poet and author Maya Angelou. "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Many of us value empathy — the ability to walk in someone else's shoes or climb into someone else's skin — in our personal lives. But research indicates it's an indispensable skill for enterprise leaders, who must serve the best interests of their entire organization rather than the interests of a single business unit or functional area. Empathy helps leaders organize, influence and motivate stakeholders around a unified purpose. Empathy also helps executives

from global organizations connect with employees and customers across countries and cultures.

“The faster the world gets, the more everything old and slow matters,” journalist Thomas Friedman has said. In his book “Thank You for Being Late,” he describes ways to both adapt to the accelerating speed of change in the 21st century and mitigate its adverse effects. Personal connections are important. “It takes caring to ignite caring; it takes empathy to ignite empathy,” he wrote.

I consider empathy an essential component of modern leadership.

Understanding the needs and wants of other individuals, overcoming differences, and acting compassionately are the tools of team building, group decision making, persuasion and negotiation. As workforces become more diverse, empathy becomes increasingly important and challenging.

Empathy should come from the top down — but also from the bottom up and laterally among peers. Successful enterprises align the motivations and behaviors of all their employees.

Workers used to be seen as replaceable, like equipment. That mindset evolved through the decades. Thinking shifted — from Frederick Taylor’s scientific management theory and its focus on worker efficiency at the turn of the 20th century to the Hawthorne studies’ groundbreaking (for its time) discovery in the 1920s that human attitudes and motivations matter to studies on emotional and social intelligence in the early 2000s that raised the bar much higher. The trend toward greater empathy has continued unabated, and, now, as we near 2020, empathy has moved to center stage.

Can empathy can be learned? Yes, with proper instruction, practice and a good role model or two. In my classes and consulting sessions, I teach a four-pronged approach to empathy development that incorporates reflection, self-awareness, other-awareness and results.

My materials reference the work of Adam Waytz, professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. During the 2015 NeuroLeadership Summit, he outlined the impediments to empathy: a failure to accommodate other people's experiences, inability to read individuals correctly and lack of mental models to form new points of view.

Waytz also warns us against the potential downsides of empathy. In a 2016 article in the Harvard Business Review, he said empathetic people may suffer from "compassion fatigue" or exhaustion, lapses in ethical judgment because of loyalty to certain individuals, and zero-sum resource limits (more empathy for person A this morning may mean less empathy for person B this afternoon).

Feeling another person's pain can drain our energy. Yet empathy delivers wide-ranging benefits when it's applied and managed effectively.

Here are a few practical guidelines:

1. Separate empathy and perspective taking. Both can positively affect outcomes. But the former establishes emotional and social relationships, and the latter relies on cognitive and strategic processes that enhance problem solving.

2. Listen, ask questions, check biases and pay attention to people's body language during meetings and personal interactions.

3. Avoid distractions and be fully present during meetings and personal interactions.

4. Use empathy as both a receiver and sender of information. Some of us are good at listening and having people feel heard. Others of us know how to tailor our message so people will hear it. The most-effective leaders do both well.

Leaders can turn to neuroscience if they need more convincing. When people are on the receiving end of empathy, the pleasure centers of their brains light up, and they are more likely to show empathy in return. Practicing and receiving empathy has been shown to strengthen resilience and trust, reduce stress and conflict, and encourage creativity and innovation. In the midst of conflict, skillful empathy can break down barriers and facilitate communication. Practicing empathy authentically builds empathy in other people. It's a virtuous — but underused — cycle.

Given the advantages of empathy, every leader should consider Angelou's words and make showing empathy a higher priority than simply displaying expertise or taking swift action. In the 21st century, embracing empathy is at the heart of leaders' work.

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