

# Empathic Leadership and Responsible Connections

by

Howard Hansen

*“If you are willing to discipline yourself, the physical universe won’t need to discipline you.” - Leonard Orr*

## ***Introduction***

My partner Steve Geske and I pursue a mission to guide, challenge, nurture and support leaders who give themselves to creating a better world.

If your own mission challenges you to do the same, then this white paper is for you. When working to support leaders, the practice of overly-empathic behaviors can hurt your efforts, rather than help.

Recognizing and changing your own behavior to become a more “personal responsibility-oriented” leader is a big step toward making the world better.

## ***A Story***

I watched the expression on my client’s face change. It turned from a sparkle of interested engagement and enthusiastic interest to a frown of doubt and concern. As a facilitator, I recognize and learn from observing adjustments in body language while working with participants in my workshops. In this case, I was engaged with a group of company leaders and their boss, the CEO. We were spending a day focused on what is usually called “team-building.” Our goal was to help these managers find ways to drive higher company performance. The participant – I’ll call her Tricia - was struggling with a concept I had just thrown out for discussion. I had suggested that managers and

leaders who see themselves as empathic towards their followers – as bosses whose success depends on high levels of empathy – may be doing more harm than good to their organizations. When I saw Tricia's puzzled expression, I knew we were getting somewhere. She was about to alter her long-held definition of empathy. Tricia had believed her abundance of empathy was an important asset to her success as a manager. She knew the members of her team described her high levels of empathy as a desirable characteristic. Now, she was beginning to doubt this ideal.

### ***A Background***

My work with leaders, who are usually founders and chief executives of their own businesses, suggests they tend to populate either one or another end on the empathy scale. They have either too little, expecting their employees to “sink or swim,” or too much, taking on the anxieties of everyone who works for them. Further, they mostly all base their behaviors on a mistaken definition of the word.

In my consulting practice, I am asked to help companies design and implement their mission and values statements. These statements are important baselines for organizations. When authentically created, understood, integrated and practiced, they serve as behavioral benchmarks for critical thinking, decision-making and leadership. Mission defines the purpose of the organization's existence. Values describe how members of the organization are to behave in all situations, reflecting the most fundamental and unchangeable beliefs about what's important in all relationships.

My clients often select the word “empathy” as a core value. They embrace the idea that managing client relationships is a key to business success.

Central to this principle is the recognition that empathy, the capacity for “...*identification with or... experiencing of feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another...*” (Random House), is foundational to successful interactions with those clients. There is danger for the

undisciplined here. This is the moment when the word – empathy – may be assigned meaning beyond what is legitimate. As client service businesses struggle to determine how to invest in making their customers satisfied, they nearly always expand the definition of empathy to mean more than “*understanding* the feelings and thoughts” of their clients. It also begins to mean, implicitly, to “*take care of* the clients’ needs”, often by any means possible. This expanded view of empathic behavior requires that whatever is wrong be not only identified and understood, but that it be *fixed* as well.

In the software publishing business, I’ve heard support specialists joke with each other about their most helpless customers. Sometimes, they have to help their customers turn their computers on. Excellent support organizations know they must do whatever is reasonably required to help customers with any problem even remotely related to the successful use of their products. As this expanded view of empathy is integrated into customer services, it

naturally finds its way into other relationship rules in the company. It is, after all, a *core* value. Soon, leaders and managers learn to over care for their followers. They not only deepen their sensitivities to find out what people are feeling in their jobs, they go farther and begin to believe it’s their responsibility to fix whatever is wrong.

Some of my client companies have developed interviewing processes which focus on how empathic a candidate is likely to be should he/she accept an offer of employment. Interviewers look for behavior stories from candidates which illustrate how they have cared for others. These inquiries are not likely, however, to also ask how candidates might have required others to take personal responsibility for their own needs and desires.

It is important that managers develop ways of leading others which compels them to take responsibility for finding solutions to problems and challenges they face. The habit of looking externally for solutions rather than to one’s own brain creates an organization of stifled innovation and

creativity. Employees who learn to take responsibility for their own decision-making become stronger contributors to business success. They do more mental exercises involving information gathering; perceptively weigh alternatives; and formulate, articulate and implement best solutions.

And this takes us back to Tricia.

When I suggested to her and others in the room that leaders should set fixed barriers beyond which empathic behavior should cease and at which requirements for personal responsibility should begin, Tricia got a little “shook up”. She had always viewed herself as a highly empathic boss. She believed this because her employees described her as “caring,” “concerned,” and “always available.” Important descriptive words which were missing, however, were “direct,” “clear,” and “expecting my best performance.”

The danger for this manager and others is not so much being seen as concerned or caring, but *not* being described as one who expects her employees to manage their

challenges by insisting they accept personal responsibility for choices they make on the job to meet the company’s mission.

### ***The Quick Fix is a Sinkhole***

We cross ourselves up when we over-define “empathy.”

We have come to believe that acting empathically means both understanding another’s perspective then *acting protectively* towards that person. It is better for us to understand that when we *act protectively* towards the person (towards whom we feel empathy) we can usually create more harm than good.

Are we not surprised in this age of entitlement, when children are told they can do no wrong and adults are ill-equipped to delay gratification, that employees look first to their bosses to fix their problems? Back in the 1970’s, the late M. Scott Peck was advising parents to teach their children the values of accepting responsibility and delaying gratification. He saw the future and, accompanying it, the coming quick-fix generation. In his book, The Road

Less Traveled, Peck wrote, “We cannot solve life’s problems except by solving them....We must accept responsibility for a problem before we can solve it. We cannot solve a problem by saying ‘It’s not my problem.’ We cannot solve a problem by hoping that someone else will solve it for us. I can solve a problem only when I say, “This is *my* problem and it’s up to me to solve it.”

Leaders who practice “beyond empathy” say to themselves, “If I can just get this person to get over it – whatever *it* is, I can get back to the other things on my list.” This translates into action which looks and sounds like, “I understand how you feel, now feel differently and here’s some fast advice on how to do that.”

Of course, nothing in this approach puts the team member in a position to work on understanding his or her depression, frustration and discouragement well enough to lead to important personal change. If anything, this approach signals the employee that h/she need only wait around for the boss to apply a solution.

For those reasons and through these behaviors, empathic behaviors by leaders do more harm than good.

### ***The Non-healthy Empathy Test***

#### ***Are you an over empathic leader? Do you...***

- Tell the other what to do, how to think and how to feel?
- Try to help too much?
- Assume increasing responsibility for the other?
- Do things for the other he or she could do for self?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you are likely leading with a flawed concept of how empathy ought to work.

As the leader invests emotional time in the practices listed above, s/he exhausts the energy supply needed for setting direction and making decisions. As a result, business performance declines.

## ***Healthy Empathy in Practice***

I was newly hired at a small software publishing company. The man who hired me – the president and a person from whom I would come to gain deep insight into my own potential for success – hired me because he needed to add management experience to his young team. I was about 10 years older than the average age of the small leadership group I joined. No job descriptions existed for the roles we took on. We were inventing our jobs as we went along. The CEO joked to me during my offer and acceptance discussions, “Your title will be Vice President of Something Important.” We were in the well-known entrepreneurial start up business model. It was to become an exciting, scary, energizing and richly rewarding time. I spent much of my first months working in an undeveloped area of the business. This required me to develop a capacity for venturing into uncharted waters, then assessing, recommending and taking responsibility for implementing and managing specific strategies. We

were experimenting with approaches with little or no historical proof of success. The challenges were daunting. Soon I became overwhelmed with options and choices. I was stuck and unable to choose a next direction. The more anxious I became, the less able I was to rationally consider options. I went to my boss wanting him to decide the next step for me. I was convinced only he could see the next move. I began to outline the available options (as I saw them) hoping he would see the complexities I saw and bail me out. I knew his answer would release the barriers to my thinking and open the path. His response was not what I wanted but exactly what I needed. At a point in my long monologue he held up his hand, palm toward me, and waited for my silence. “I hired you because I trust you,” he said. Then, he turned and walked away. I was never the same employee after that moment. In that moment, my boss had really said, “You are here to accept the challenges, engage your brain and apply your best

thinking to our success. I believe in your ability to do this.”

My boss practiced healthy empathy. He understood my situation but resisted the temptation to do my thinking for me.

***Follow these steps to be a more effectively empathic leader;***

- When offered an issue by an employee, pause. During the pause, say nothing in response until you’ve had this internal dialogue
  - “What are the unseen reasons this person has brought this to me?”
  - “What do I think about the problem I’m hearing? What tension producing factors reside at the center of this problem and the person who brought it to me?”
- Say to the person, “Please continue to consider solutions to this problem, especially ones you haven’t thought of.”

A push back you might hear is, “I *have* thought of everything!” This resistance is evidence there are solutions not yet thought of. Ignore the resistance. Push for more insight.

- If you get further resistance, ask, “What are the reasons *you* feel anxious, worried and frustrated about this problem? And which of those reasons can you overcome now, which tomorrow and which after then?”
- Ask the person to return to his/her own thinking about the problem and return later with more solutions, or a recommended solution, and to do this reflecting in a calm and quiet place.

Throughout this process, pay particular attention to your own anxiousness. Call on your cognitive skills, not your feelings, to conduct this conversation.

Expect that you will repeat this process more than once with each person seeking *your* fix for *his or her* problem.

towards truly helping your followers develop into effective leaders.

Setting your boundaries and becoming a “personal responsibility-oriented” leader will go a long way

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