

In Praise of Empathy

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Introduction

With President Biden's first speech to the nation focused on Covid-19 prevention we witnessed a strong empathetic message for everyone, practice safe guidelines to reduce virus transmission and staggering death rates. More recently the President telephoned the George Floyd family to express general support. Empathy is now back in our national discourse.

In the business world and in popular culture empathy has gained steady prominence. Daniel Goleman who popularized the term 'emotional intelligence' (or E.I.) in 1995 as equal if not more important than I.Q. He identified empathy as a core component. In his 1998 Harvard Business Review article 'What Makes a Leader' Goleman discusses E.I. as the sine qua non of leadership and again as a core communication skill.

The business practice of 'design thinking' encourages organizations to research customer empathy as key to understanding marketplace product or service need and solution design. Empathy is all the more important given our growing multicultural perspectives of reality.

What is this phenomena of empathy? Can professional consultants, coaches, attorneys, MBAs, Human Resource Professionals, Clergy, therapists and others think deeper about the merits of empathy. Below I will explore these questions.

Definition

While several definitions exist two generic types of empathy are evident. First, one-way empathy is the capacity to relate, be simpatico, 'read' others. George Herbert Mead called this 'taking the role of the other'. Hence, we thoughtfully consider others and their viewpoint during our interaction. This is often easier said than done in today's climate of extreme views.

We may have to practice a maturity once voiced by Aristotle, that a mature mind can hold one view while considering another which we may not agree with. Second, there is two-way empathy which includes the above but embraces the communication of our understanding back to the other person we are relating to; I will explore this further below.

Value

The communication of empathy with another provides a supportive context, even a healing aspect for both client and practitioner whether coach, consultant, or therapist. Two-way empathy supports a client's self-validation and can encourage further self-exploration. As change agents, we are a thought partner who allows a client to move to deeper levels of self-exploration with our empathetic communication.

Moreover, isolation is diminished and interpersonal effectiveness increased. Empathy helps us feel less alone especially if it is two-way empathic communication.

When we converse with another person we can verbally and non-verbally acknowledge what we are hearing. The preeminent psychologist Carl R. Rogers advocated this type. He suggested empathy was an attitude, a 'check in' with another person to confirm understanding of their comments. This promotes communication.

With this type of empathy we are not offering interpretations of what we hear or see or sense. We are not searching for unconscious processes, nor are we searching for how to disagree. While somewhat superficial this empathy type is critical to promote self-esteem and a sense of safety in others during our interaction. We bolster our own self-concept while also supporting the self-concept of others when we acknowledge understanding (whether we agree with their comments or not).

With two-way empathy we convey safety and trust in a client without judgement. We thereby model kindness, general understanding, and tolerance. Moreover, we hope the client builds or exercises growth in their own empathy.

There is a deeper empathy too that should be acknowledged. The noted psychologist Heinz Kohut calls this 'vicarious introspection'. Here, we move beyond mere recognition and communication of our understanding of another's immediate experience. Instead, we attempt to see another person's bigger life situation, their past experience and likely its influence on their immediate experience with us. To ourselves we may ask several questions:

- What is the entirety or the whole of the other's perceived situation?
- What are conscious and unconscious elements of a client's life history?
- What might it be like to be the other?

We may or may not communicate our answers to such questions to the other person, but we strive to understand more deeply what is being communicated. Kohut suggests we value empathy as a facilitative method to enable a client to receive interpretations. Of-course not all clients can tolerate the depth of our empathetic response. Hence, practitioners must gauge client acceptance while we too gauge our ability to communicate sensitive areas in our interactions.

Coaching has value here without being overly therapeutic. Organization consultants too might not be sufficiently experienced to embrace this empathy type. Therapists on the other hand often make use of vicarious empathy.

Another aspect of empathy can be identified as a 'here and now' or 'moment to moment' style of client interaction. We strive to be in the client's shoes in total, as the psychiatrist R.D. Laing voiced. Laing even embraced this deep type of empathy for use with his psychotic patients. To merge with another using a 'here and now' approach we are aware of a client's movements, postures, gestures, facial expressions, comments, and pauses in communication.

Several human growth impromptu approaches also embrace verbal and non-verbal sensitivity to a client's total presentation. These include J.L. Moreno's Sociodrama and Psychodrama, Fritz Pearl's Gestalt Therapy, and Daniel Glaser's Reality Therapy.

'Here and now' micro practice is most suitable for experienced professionals. We think and feel our way into a client's inner world and undertake their journey as partners. As practitioners we grasp our client's struggle and help articulate and explore their concerns through empathy. Reflection on a client's comments takes place yet content, feelings, and interpretations may all help promote client development.

Conclusion

As mentioned, the approaches to empathy explored above may in part overlap. Here and now empathy however is best applied in a therapeutic context, while the other two forms may be most useful with coaches and organization consultants. Some approaches may be useful in tandem and not applied exclusively. Nevertheless, the goal is client recognition that they are understood and that their problem solving and/or growth occurs. We must use empathy with this type of positive intention, and never use it with negative intension (as a means to selfish ends).

Other forms of empathy remain unexplored in this essay such as self-empathy and societal empathy for national and/or global epic conditions such as mass shootings, Covide-19 deaths, wars, starvations, threats to democracy, etc. In all its forms empathy challenges us to a higher level of humanness. We remain to ourselves and to others in praise of empathy as a vehicle for humanizing people's lives.