

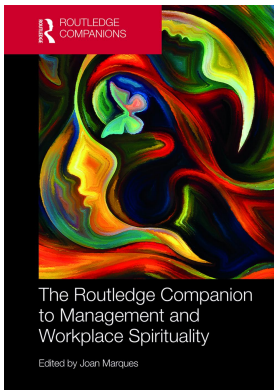
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Routledge Companion to Management and Workplace Spirituality

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The Role of Empathy in the Professional Workplace

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351015110-22>

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Published online on: 11 Mar 2019

How to cite :- Jody A. Worley. 11 Mar 2019, *The Role of Empathy in the Professional Workplace from: The Routledge Companion to Management and Workplace Spirituality* Routledge

Accessed on: 27 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351015110-22>

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21

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN THE PROFESSIONAL WORKPLACE

Jody A. Worley

Why Empathy, and Why Now?

The modern workplace environment is likely one of the most dynamic and pervasive social relational processes in which humans interact. There are hundreds of thousands of books and research articles on organizational behavior, business management, and leadership in organizations. Empathy, although not a concept that frequently appears in the organizational research literature, has important implications for understanding performance, leadership, communication, and collaboration, among other valued processes in the professional workplace. Organizational outcomes that do receive a great deal of attention are likely influenced by the underlying role of empathy, its absence or presence, and which therefore warrants more attention than it receives.

This chapter aims to highlight the role of empathy in the professional workplace by presenting evidence for internal and external benefits to a company when the notion of empathy is embraced and practiced as an integral part of the organizational climate. First, two components of empathy, cognitive (perspective-taking) and emotional concern, are briefly described. Then, ways that empathy contributes to the professional workplace are discussed by focusing on internal and external benefits for companies. Although the range of possible benefits is broad, this chapter will focus on internal contributions of empathy for workplace communication, collaboration, performance, and leadership. The role of empathy in the workplace also has implications for relationships in the external social context in which the organization operates. Potential benefits outside the organization might include global market collaborations, philanthropy and social impact.

Empathy in the Workplace

The role of empathy in the workplace is relevant precisely due to a crossover or transmission process in human relations (Jones & Fletcher, 1993; Westman, 2001). Employees relate with each other, and with their respective supervisors, managers, leaders, other stakeholders, and so on, in order to communicate, collaborate, and work effectively to produce results. Although trust formation is important for relationship building, the empathic role in establishing trust requires the ability to interact and communicate effectively (empathically). The relational process is a crossover process. There is an empathic reaction at work.

Table 21.1 The Role of Empathy in the Workplace: Internal and External Benefits to the Company

<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
Communication and collaboration	Global market collaboration
Performance and profitability	Philanthropy and social impact
Leadership	

The literal root meaning of empathy (*em pathos*; “feeling into”) implies a clear emotional component. However, empathy may best be considered as a set of related constructs including emotional and non-emotional components (Davis, 1983). *Perspective-taking* is the cognitive component where individuals imagine how they would feel in the position of another (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This is the non-emotional component of empathy. Social learning theorists (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Stotland, 1969) support this view, and have explained the transmission of emotions as a conscious processing of information. Whereas *empathic concern* is an emotional responsiveness in which individuals experience and share others’ feelings and actively respond (Davis, 1983). The core relational theme for empathy would involve the sharing of another person’s emotional state, distressed or otherwise. Starcevic and Piontek (1997) define empathy as interpersonal communication that is predominantly emotional in nature and involves the ability to be affected by other’s affective state, as well as to be able to read in oneself what that affect has been. Likewise, Lazarus (1991) defined empathy as “sharing another’s feelings by placing oneself psychologically in that person’s circumstances” (p. 287). So, empathy is the ability to understand and communicate one’s understanding of another person’s emotion (Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Consider that empathy is an ability-based, interactional relationship building process, rather than strictly as a subjective, affective-based emotional concept. Therefore, empathy is not simply a feeling that we have for others, but also a responsive action that we share with others in work relations with them.

The role of empathy in the workplace has implications for relationships within organizations. Organizations benefit internally when empathy is present and shared in the workplace through enhanced communication and improved relations between leaders and followers. Communication effectiveness and healthy leader–member exchanges, then, contribute to organizational performance and profitability. Likewise, empathy contributes to external business development through stronger market collaborations, as well as through philanthropic initiatives and social impact. A summary of these proposed benefits is presented in Table 21.1.

Internal Benefits for the Role of Empathy in the Workplace

Communication and Collaboration

Conrad and Newberry (2012) recognized the importance of communication skills to drive effective leadership including the ability to communicate openly and honestly. Communication without this people-focused element may be constructed as command and control orders. Effective business leadership, however, is dependent upon communicating in optimistic yet realistic terms, and empowering people to help build the future. Workers prefer a sense of security and optimism about the future of their work. When empathic communication is encouraged at work, employees feel more comfortable speaking openly and that their perspectives matter. Culture building is a business necessity and that is achieved through communication that inspires and encourages the value of commitment, collaboration, cohesiveness, and collective identity.

Empathy is related to personality traits of openness and agreeableness (Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998). In their review of interpersonal communication skills in organizational scholarship literature, Conrad and Newberry (2012) found consistent emphasis on the need to manage emotions and concentrate on controlling reactions to stressful situational factors. They found that by learning to manage emotions and control reactions to work-related stress, managers and supervisors were more effective at communicating stability and encouraging harmony among organizational staff. This type of emotional and social intelligence is commonly understood as a contributing factor in the ability to build relationships, inspire trust, control emotions, and express empathy through the art of listening. In fact, theorists propose that human bonding is achievable through developing awareness for communication needs, along with initiating communication that reduces barriers and conflict, while sustaining trust in a climate that invites dialogue. The ability to build and foster trust in workplace relationships requires interpersonal skills, or “soft skills,” such as empathy.

Soft skills include techniques and methods of developing written communication, oral communication, leadership communication, team skills, listening skills, presentation skills, global/cultural awareness, and interpersonal communication. Evidence from the World Economic Forum (2016, p. 3) suggests that employers in all occupational fields place greater value on employees’ communication skills than they do on their technical skills:

Overall, social skills— such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others— will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills, such as programming or equipment operation and control. In essence, technical skills will need to be supplemented with strong social and collaboration skills.

The reality is that organizational members may have brilliant ideas for product development, innovation, growth, and expansion of the company, but to succeed they must be able to communicate those ideas. In short, empathy, the ability to express one’s emotions, and the ability to identify others’ emotions, represents a complex set of skills that vary among individuals (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990) and may assist in the development of positive relationships, problem-solving, decision-making, and accomplishment of personal goals. Therefore, a few suggestions for enhancing your ability to engage in empathic conversation are presented in Table 21.2.

Leadership Development

A key point in the discussion of the role of empathy in workplace communication is the notion that expressing one’s own emotions involves the ability to communicate feelings accurately and to express related needs. George (2000, p. 1034) states, “the accurate expression of emotion ensures that people are able to effectively communicate with others to meet their needs and accomplish their goals or objectives” and notes “ambivalence over expression of emotions can

Table 21.2 Recommendations for Enhancing Empathic Conversation

-
- Be present, physically and mentally, to what is happening in the exchange.
 - Listen carefully and pay attention to the use of words and phrases.
 - Respond to the central message.
 - Adapt and be flexible in responding as the other person’s thoughts and feelings change.
 - Look for behaviors and listen for verbal cues to confirm that you understand correctly.
-

hamper an individual from developing beneficial interpersonal relationships in life.” Likewise, the ability of leaders to display and communicate emotions may influence how followers perceive them in the workplace, and thus their ability to develop effective relationships with employees (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). This may explain why people who rate highly on empathy are more likely viewed by their peers as having leadership qualities (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006).

By now, it is generally accepted that results in the workplace are associated with emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence has been defined as the ability to perceive emotion in oneself and others, use emotions to facilitate thinking, understand emotions and emotion processes, and manage the experience and expression of emotions in oneself and others (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). This has been demonstrated by an order of magnitude across industries and organizational contexts (Coté & Morgan, 2002; Wong & Law, 2002). More recent research also shows that the mood of leaders plays a role in that dynamic (Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Kellett et al., 2006; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002). A leader’s positive or negative mood and emotions sets the tone for everyone else; it is contagious. A grumpy and detached boss, for example, creates a toxic workplace climate filled with negative attitudes that gets in the way of recognizing opportunities for improvement or increased performance. An engaged and optimistic supervisor inspires followers to take initiative and overcome obstacles rather than getting distracted by what or whom might be considered the source of “the problem” when challenges arise.

Although research on the role of emotion and the contagious effects it has on others is often received with responses from business professionals as, “of course, we have known that all along,” the reality is that if the process is recognized at all, it is still not often discussed. The conversation about a leader or co-worker’s emotional style and its impact on the work climate is largely ignored or avoided. For many people, the topic is viewed as “soft” and perhaps trivial. Indeed, the physiological processes responsible for shared emotional experiences is a naturally occurring product of the human limbic system—the brain’s central processor of emotion. This is relevant for understanding the role of empathy in the professional workplace because although it may sound like “common sense” when we read or hear about it, we usually do not notice the process or consider its impact on interpersonal relationships at work. There is an increasing interest in research evidence on emotional intelligence among leaders because a leader with emotional intelligence can monitor his or her moods through self-awareness and then change or improve upon them through self-management. More specifically, someone in a leadership position can better understand moods with empathy, and act in ways that influence the positive moods of others through relationship management.

Research evidence has shown a relationship between empathy and the cognitive skills that underlie effective leadership behaviors (Wolff et al., 2002). According to their model, Wolff et al. (2002) suggest that because task leaders organize and plan group work, a leader must develop a vision that encompasses a wide variety of often confusing information about environment, task characteristics, and group members’ abilities and personalities. To do so requires a pattern recognition and perspective taking. Because empathy consists of the ability and desire to understand others’ feeling, Wolff et al. argue that empathy should correlate with pattern recognition and perspective taking. Their findings supported their model of an indirect relationship between empathy and task leadership as a function of cognitive abilities.

Kellett et al. (2006) makes an important distinction between interactive empathy and passive empathy. Interactive empathy is a more engaged process such that followers recognize the leader’s concern through his or her role in creating a shared emotional experience. Examples of interactive empathy include words of encouragement or inspiration, or the optimistic expression

of a vision for positive change. Passive empathy is demonstrated when a person feels sympathy for others but does not influence the shared emotional tone of the group. With regards to the role of empathy in workplace leadership, there is perhaps less concern with the individual's internal emotional state than whether or not the individual has exerted leadership by creating an emotional tie with others.

While visible leader behavior and action might reflect the competencies and traits of a leader, there is general agreement that supportive communication and relationship building that empowers others also characterize effective leadership. Empathic communication includes listening, encouraging, facilitating, clarifying, and providing emotional support. Specific behaviors aimed at establishing norms for collaboration through communication and encouraging followers to voice ideas helps facilitate the emergence of shared leadership (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). The emergence of an exchange relationship can flourish when there is supportive communication. It is reasonable to assume that this relationship building process contributes to performance and profitability in the professional workplace.

Performance and Profitability

The crossover of emotion that occurs between leaders and followers can substantially influence job attitudes and performance. Pescosolido (2002) argued, and his case examples illustrated, that emergent leadership in self-managed work teams involves a process of managing group members' emotions in order to improve group performance. Furthermore, emergent leaders in the context of self-managed teams are empathic and responsive to the needs of followers. Specifically, empathy ability is positively related to perspective-taking skill and pattern recognition ($r=0.20$, and $r=0.25$, $p<0.05$, respectively; Wolff et al., 2002). This evidence provides a reasonable foundation for better understanding the role of empathy in workplace performance and profitability.

An empathic supervisor or manager is more likely to provide the type of support that facilitates recovery from a workplace incident that might otherwise thwart employee performance. Research evidence shows that emotion-focused coping (EFC) in the workplace is positively related to task performance (Gooty, Gavin, Ashkanasy, & Thomas, 2014; Miner & Glomb, 2010). EFC refers to an individual's attempts to let go or detach from the actual occurrence of work events as a way to deal with the emotional experience that may be associated with those events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). It is important to note that EFC is not the suppression of emotions from a critical incident. Rather, EFC is an acknowledgment of the event and the conscious effort by an individual to choose how they will emotionally respond. The management of emotions in this way through EFC fosters workplace relationships such that workers can effectively perform their assigned duties and meet the requirements of the job. There is evidence to support this on an individual level within-person (Miner & Glomb, 2010; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), but also in between-person relationships in the workplace as with the supervisor-employee exchange or in the context of teams and team performance (Akgün, Keskin, Cebecioglu, & Dogan, 2015; Gooty et al., 2014).

Team member trust, for example, is reinforced when expectations and project-related outcomes align. This contributes to the formation of collective empathy, sometimes referred to as affective-based trust, where team members learn to understand each other's feelings. As it forms, collective empathy functions to reduce any sense of emotional vulnerability and allows for openness and transparent communication. So, what is that process? How does it work? There is evidence that it begins with familiarity with team members (Akgün et al., 2015). Specifically, Akgün et al. were able to show that when people know each other, perhaps from prior work

projects, that they are more present with each other, open to change, empathically attuned, and emotionally responsive to each other. The consequence of this collective empathy, then, is that it influences the learning behaviors, in this case among software development teams. They observed that when team members understood and shared each other's feelings they were more effective at discovering and correcting software product-related issues and problems in the workplace.

In addition to the influence that collective empathy had on learning behaviors, it also influenced the ability of the project team to develop and implement products much faster in terms of speed-to-market. The management of emotions and collective empathy within the project team contributed to faster implementation and production over and above the use of advanced technology for information processing and dissemination. But there is more.

In addition to the influence that collective empathy had on learning behaviors and speed-to-market production, it also contributed to a reduction in development costs. As the ability to adapt and take advantage of shared feelings developed among team members, there was an observed reduction in quality control problems, redundancies, and the need to rework elements of the product, which ultimately reduced the implementation and software development costs. In summary, then, Akgün et al. observed that collective empathy accounted for 28% of the variability in team learning, 15% of the variability in speed-to-market production, and 7% of the variance in reduced development costs.

There are other examples of research evidence demonstrating that leaders strongly influenced their subordinates' feelings of frustration and feelings of optimism, which in turn influenced objective sales performance (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002). Pirola-Merlo, Haertel, Mann, and Hirst (2002) also found that leaders had a strong impact on affective team climate, which in turn influenced team performance.

External Benefits for the Role of Empathy in the Workplace

Global Collaboration

Empathy must be at the core of any collaborative effort involving cross-cultural teams. Empathy extends well beyond feeling to understanding, and it extends beyond individuals to groups, and communities of people. Empathy is a key feature of clear judgment and rational decision-making in the context of effective global collaboration because empathy is a core component of individual and collective values that are the foundation of shared sense of justice.

Collaboration from a cross-cultural perspective can be defined as the study of similarities and differences in the processes and behavior at work across different cultures (cf. Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). Unfortunately, despite rapid global commercialization of products in a dynamic and evolving global business environment, there is still limited attention to the process of addressing cultural differences. There is strong emphasis on understanding cultural differences with the intent to recognize and manage those differences. However, there is still little that is actually known about the process for optimizing the similarities and differences across cultures (Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2011).

When considering global innovation systems as social systems, there is a process of "social making" of innovations that can define a socially accepted space determined by cultural interactions including affective frames of identity and difference, cognitive frames of knowledge, and normative sets of values (Pohlmann, Gebhardt, & Eitzkowitz, 2005). The development of a shared mental model and shared organizational climate that supports cross-cultural collaboration serve as important factors in sustaining global innovation. In order to fully understand

cross-cultural team interactions, it is necessary to examine how disagreements, miscommunications, and critical incidents emerge. Cultural standards generally provide more insight on how critical incidents emerge because they show how critical incidents occur in the first place when choosing actions based on particular cultural standards and values and disregarding the values and standards of the other party. This is where empathic concern plays a valuable role in cross-cultural collaboration.

A project leader on cross-cultural collaborations will benefit greatly from skills that facilitate cultural empathy. For example, in global product innovation projects that involve cross-cultural collaborations, there is an inherent interdependence between global and local perspectives. If information and knowledge-sharing is directed from the global perspective to the local market, the local teams are in an implementation role and the collaboration process may collapse if the global perspective-taking does not include necessary elements of the culture for local execution.

Perspective-taking and empathy can be encouraged by promoting conversations that reveal people's experiences as they work through the challenges of working across cultures or languages. For example, in a study of cross-national teams that included members whose native language was German or English, few of the native English speakers recognized the struggle to communicate in English among some of their German colleagues (Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012). Likewise, the native German speakers were unaware of the feelings of exclusion and ostracism experienced by the non-German speaking colleagues when the Germans spoke their native language. Members from both cultures were open to changing their own behavior to be more accommodating once the issue was raised and discussed. Promoting transparency and candid sharing of experiences and emotions allows team members to empathize with each other. This reduces the emotional burden for everyone.

Jensen (2015) provides a case study illustration of the role that cultural empathy plays following a failed collaboration in which the local team did not feel the global project leader and management team were open or responsive to local customer needs. In that case, the global team developed an innovation strategy composed of joint planning with local teams to emphasize responsiveness in the local target market, but also as a way to build trust and values for transparent communication. Because the project leader from the global team invited local teams to participate in planning, local team members could actively collaborate and shape ideas for the global concept. This helped create a more collaborative approach for the project leader and resulted in a faster time to market, a localized product, increased customer demand, and motivation to launch and sell the new concept. Efforts to achieve these outcomes had failed until members of the global team exercised skills to facilitate cultural empathy. The us-them perspective that can sometimes be a barrier on cross-cultural teams, but empathy can buffer this attitude and enhance productivity.

Philanthropy and Social Impact

Corporate philanthropy in the professional workplace has been described as a marketing instrument that highlights the reputation of the company as a good corporate citizen (Brammer & Millington, 2005; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006), or as a tool to manage financial benefits (Lev, Petrovits & Radhakrishnan, 2010). In contrast to this primarily top-down rational interpretation, researchers have increasingly recognized that, along with executive decision-makers, other employees are also important actors in corporate philanthropy (Kim, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2010). Specifically, employees are important drivers of and participants in corporate philanthropy initiatives (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007). Employee involvement

appears to be guided more by emotional mechanisms, such as collectively shared desire to help others in need, than by individual rational or cognitive considerations, such as job skills enhancement, or organizational rewards.

The notion of collective empathy has only recently been introduced and explicitly considered in relation to corporate philanthropy (Muller, Pfarrer, & Little, 2014) as a more participative approach that involves the influence that employees have on executive leadership decisions about philanthropic initiatives. Traditionally, corporate philanthropy decisions have often been limited by the same strategic and rational process that is used to make business decisions, rather than a broader perspective held by all stakeholders including employees and clients. In other words, corporate philanthropy decisions are largely purposeful decisions that align with the company's strategy. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but the reality in practice is that there remains a great deal of uncertainty in corporate philanthropy decisions. The connection between corporate philanthropy and organizational strategy and business objectives is not always clear. Moreover, there are few rules on when to engage in corporate giving, at what scale, or in what form. This ambiguity allows for the role of emotion in general, and empathy in particular, to influence corporate philanthropy decisions.

Consider that corporate social responsibility arises from a sense of altruism or prosocial behavior. As these acts of altruism are often based on feelings of empathy (Bar-Tal, 1976; Batson, 1987), the motivation to give is likely to be influenced by how the cause is perceived by the manager or executive decision-maker. Therefore, it is reasonable that managers rely on their own attitudes and feelings of social consciousness when making corporate philanthropic decisions. As stated by Brown and Ferris (2007), "Selfless or not, those acts involve a degree of compassion and commitment to others" (p. 85). Likewise, there is research evidence showing that when employees receive more positive attention from managers and supervisors in the professional workplace, management is viewed as more fair, just, and empathic (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007; Kellett et al., 2006). Further, this modeling of positive supervisory support can also prompt employees to advocate for prosocial helping behaviors beyond the workplace setting, including corporate philanthropy (Aguilera et al., 2007; Frey & Meier, 2004).

A model of collective empathy in corporate philanthropy decisions developed by Muller et al. (2014) is consistent with evidence showing the importance of empathy for helping behaviors outside organizational contexts (Batson, 1987; Frey & Meier, 2004). Psychologists and social scientists understand emotions as perceptual and motivational systems of feelings. We assign meaning to feelings as a result of an internal appraisal process that is followed by action tendencies that influence decision-making. The appraisal process and the action tendencies interrupt the cognitive thinking process and redirect our attention and judgment. By strengthening the bonds of group membership, shared emotions carry more powerful action tendencies than individual emotions (Barsade & Gibson, 2012). Given that leadership decisions can be influenced by shared mental models through rational and cognitive processes, but likely also by collective emotions (cf. Parkinson & Simons, 2009), collective empathy can influence leaders to make decisions that reflect empathic action tendencies of workers in the organization (Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Therefore, corporate philanthropy decisions are not exclusively purposeful, calculated, rational decisions made in isolation by strictly business minded corporate leaders (Grant, 2012; Marquis and Lee, 2013). Rather, corporate philanthropy decisions can be linked to shared empathic concerns of employees in the professional workplace with regards to their action tendencies to respond to the needs of individuals and groups external to the organization.

Conclusion

The role of empathy in the professional workplace has implications for organizational outcomes that are internal and external to the company. Empathy is generally defined as an ability or capacity to understand and experience the feelings, thoughts, and perspectives of another person. Empathy is a process of relating with others on a cognitive level of perspective-taking, and on an emotional level. Rational perspective-taking and emotional empathy, where one is attuned to the feelings and emotions of others, may be beneficial in a variety of professional workplace settings from local or global sales teams, to health professions, and in most management or leadership position.

The role of empathy in the professional workplace contributes to relationship building and the development of trust through more effective communication and collaboration. Therefore, empathy plays a role in service orientation when working with others as part of a team within an organization, or with individuals or project teams across organizational boundaries. This was discussed in the context of international or cross-cultural workplace environments. However, the role of empathy is also vital to other aspects of those professional work relationships that were not presented in this chapter due to space limitations. For example, empathy has a role in implementing initiatives for inclusion and diversity. Likewise, empathy plays a role in political awareness in the workplace when sensing and responding to power relationships in decision-making processes. Empathy as perspective-taking and emotional awareness is critical for negotiation strategies and conflict resolution as well. While there are many other possible implications, this chapter has underscored the role of empathy when it is embraced and practiced as an integral part of the professional workplace.

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