



Empathy.

Adopting empathy as a professional skill.

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Many years ago travelling back from Regional NSW to Sydney, a rather unnerving gentleman approached me on the bus, suggesting that we travel together. Not at all comfortable with this situation, I managed to get a bit of distance between him later in the journey when we changed onto the train. He managed to find me and demanded to sit with me for the remainder of the trip. As an awkward 15 year old teenager travelling on my own, I was rather alarmed by what was happening, but did manage to get him to sit on the other side of the aisle -away from me. Across the carriage in my eyesight, there was an elderly lady sitting observing the situation. Whilst feeling at my most vulnerable, we exchanged a glance that made a connection, and in that moment, I knew she understood all of my fears, thoughts, feelings – my emotions - and that I was going to be ok. It was at that moment, I experienced the power of empathy.

In the end, I got home safely. But to this day, I still remember that lady's face like it was yesterday - because of the connection we made. We all experience those moments in life (maybe not quite as dramatic as that...) where you just want someone to come up to you, to look at you, and understand everything that you are thinking and feeling. Someone to form a connection to your emotions in that moment, without judgment. Someone to display a little bit of empathy.

Empathy is often described as the ability to step into another person's shoes, and experience their thoughts and feelings, and to see things from their perspective. However, mostly when we think of the term "empathy", we usually mistake it for "sympathy". It's often thought that to be empathetic,

you need to evoke sympathy. They are both emotion based, they both require an acknowledgement of another person's feelings, and depending on the situation, both qualities maybe needed to work through a certain difficulty.

But where sympathy is a feeling of condolence, sorrow or pity from *our own* perspective, empathy is the ability to understand the other person's feelings from *their* perspective. I believe that embracing empathetic communication in our interactions with others allows us to observe their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, to be able to translate it into something that we can experientially understand, without emotional attachment. When we listen empathetically, we are listening not just for words, but for tone, for emotion, for body language, for connotation and for perception, and (in my case) the risks, to allow us to find that little nugget that allows for a connection to be made. Listening not only with our ears, but with our eyes, our instincts and our heart. This skill of empathetic communication, I believe, is fundamentally establishing a connection with others through non-judgemental observations.

"...it is establishing a connection through non-judgemental observations..."

In her video on Empathy¹, CEO of both COURAGEWorks and The Daring Way, Dr. Brené Brown, suggests that where sympathy drives disconnection, empathy actually fosters a connection. She explains that as humans, we are inherently built with wanting to establish a connection. However we are also really good at evaluating situations and passing judgement. During my research I came across a powerful remark by philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti,

¹ Reference - Brené Brown on Empathy (video)

“Observing without evaluating is the highest form of human intelligence”. Whilst observation is only one element the empathetic approach, without it, and without the ability to remove judgment, empathy cannot be achieved. So, how do we observe and connect with others without evaluating or passing judgement? In Dr. Brown’s video, she describes the qualities and components required in fostering an empathetic approach as:

- Perspective taking. Being able to see, understand and experience everything involved in the situation, and recognising that their perception of the situation is seen as their reality;
- Staying out of judgement (possibly the HARDEST step). Observing things for what they actually are;
- Recognising emotions in other people. Translating their perspective and emotions into something that you can connect with to understand how they are feeling; and
- Communicating those emotions. Initiating and establish an empathetic connection.

“...Observing without evaluating is the highest form of human intelligence...”

I believe empathy is a learned skill. It is a skill that we don’t need to inherently be born with. It’s true that some people are more ‘in tune’ with certain aspects of themselves which may make adopting empathy easier, but essentially it’s a process that we can choose to adopt. Key elements that make up empathy, or an empathetic approach include:

- *Non-judgemental observation.* Listening empathetically to what they are saying, doing, feeling and expressing to be able to understand what triggered the emotions;
- *Identify their feelings and needs:* understanding their emotions from their perspective to identify their needs. Often identifying this together allows the person to self-reflect on the situation;
- *Connect those feelings with needs:* interpreting their emotions and their needs into something

you can connect to, to understand how they are feeling; and

- *Invite reflection* – express your interpretation of their thoughts and feeling to summaries what has been understood. This step allows the other person to express themselves in a different way should your interpretation not be precise.

With this in mind, how do we adopt an empathic approach as a professional skill? What value does empathetic communication have? In my view, empathy has the ability to inspire teams, to connect with customers to better deliver on their expectations, and increase organisations potential.

Considering that the major elements in any organisation are staff, customers and processes, it’s notable to recognise that the first two are human centric, and the third is in fact driven by human interactions.

Staff are arguably the most important attribute to any organisation. Be it a global company with over 5,000 employees, a team of 20 people, or even a small business with one employee. Without staff, the organisation is defunct. However, where ever human interaction and involvement occurs, emotions (thoughts and / or feelings) are involved. These emotions become risks as there are uncertainties; variables. Everyone feels different. Everyone interprets different. Different needs, expectations, and desired outcomes. These variables, which cannot be controlled by a process become a major risk faced by any organisation.

Whilst this kind of variable risk is near impossible to manage, adopting an empathetic approach in our teams, I believe, allows us to establish a connection with our staff to gain an understanding of their needs and expectations. This connection of understanding is the first step to building stronger respectful team relationships, collaboration and cooperation. In my experience, if staff feel that they are being listened to and their emotions and needs are met with respect, then they are more likely to exhibit a positive professional manner with higher motivation, engagement, empowerment and retention.

Customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is what drives a successful business these days. Without customers or clients, we have no business. So how do we connect with them to meet their needs?

Using empathy to connect with our customer and clients is something that is becoming more important in today's society. When we look at our customer interactions, we need to be able to understand our customers' perspectives to establish a connection that allows us as an organisation to deliver what they want, before they even know they want (or need it). Being able to provide all necessary communications and interactions in a manner that the customers' needs and expectations satisfied. If their needs are not satisfied, then that becomes an opportunity to engage in an empathetic conversation to better improve the interaction, allowing for continual improvement and better market positioning, and retaining customer loyalty.

When undertaking business transformations or reforms, process improvements, or strategic planning, it's important to be mindful of the perspectives of the stakeholders involved right from the start.

Maria R. Miyashiro discusses the value of integrating empathy into business decision in "The Empathy Factor". When creating business or strategic plans, it's very common to adopt the business fundamentals of "Plan. Do. Review". This is at the macro level of a business (however we can also use these fundamentals at a micro level when connecting with people). Miyashiro suggests that we add an additional step that includes an empathetic approach. "Connect. Plan. Do. Review". Connecting with the process; Connecting with the stakeholders; Connecting with the core business values. Applying empathy into the "Connect" phase allows it to be adopted through all levels of the organisation right at the initial design stage to have the ability to enhance every function of its operation.

Whenever big organisational decisions are to be made, the emotions (thoughts and /or feelings), needs and perspectives of our staff are perhaps the hardest factors to compensate for. How someone interprets an idea will establish if their needs are met, and in turn display emotions that relevant to their perceived outcome. Making a connection with our staff to understand their perceptions, and applying empathy the decision making process, resistance can be mitigated.

Empathy in business design and strategy is gaining more recognition nowadays, as there's a greater need for stronger and lasting connections with stakeholders. Service Designers, User Experience/Interface designers, and Customer Experience professionals for example, use the principles of Design Thinking which embraces the theory that to create and deliver meaningful connections and interactions, you need to understand, and show compassion towards, those you are connecting with. Design Thinking recognises that empathy is the essence of the human-centred design process², where by adopting empathetic communication techniques, you can then start the process of defining the issues to create a solution.

I think we all subconsciously experience empathy when trying to translate new information into something we can understand. We look upon our past experiences and liken it (as a form of connection) to a certain situation, feeling or process to be able to understand and appreciate the information in the correct context. But by adopting empathy as a professional skill, by bringing it out from the subconscious, and consciously using it a form of non-judgmental communication, I think we have the ability to create stronger relationships and lasting connections.

"Empathy...It's feeling with people."

Empathy. I believe it's establishing a connection through non-judgemental communication. It's

² Reference – An Introduction to Design Thinking PROCESS Guide

relating to people. It's observing emotions in people. It's feeling with people³.

I consider empathy to be a powerful professional skill that when embraced, has the capacity to inspire, motivate and empower others, and to create strong, lasting and meaningful connections - just as it did for me as a teenager on the train. On that day, empathy became a learned skill that is still constantly being developed and challenged. Empathy now plays a pivotal role in my professional experiences, providing me a tool to develop stronger connections and understandings with the people and processes I am interacting with. It's not easy, and there are many challenging moments, but there is an amazing sense of empowerment that comes once that connection has been made, and the understanding truly felt. I truly believe that adopting empathy in the workplace as a professional skill can inspire a revolution of human relationships⁴.

So I guess, in a strange way, I should thank the man on the train that day for challenging my comfort, as without him, I may have never had the opportunity of experiencing a true empathetic connection.

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About Alison Fox

Alison has worked across a diverse range of customer centric organisations, with a strong focus on customer engagement, organisational development and design. During her career, she has worked across a variety of creative and corporate organizational development assignments in both public and private sectors, focusing on frontline management, business management and leadership.

Alison's background in design and management has enabled her to lead teams of researchers, designers and operators to develop new stakeholder engagement processes across government organisations. Providing seamless customer interactions, communication strategies and staff processes, she collaborates with organisations to deliver concise information based on customer and stakeholder requirements.

³ Reference - Brené Brown on Empathy (video)

⁴ Reference: Empathy: Why it matters, and how to get it.

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Version History

Version	Date of publication	Comments
V01	22/08/2016	First Public Release
V02	23/08/2016	Minor editorial changes

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