

# EMPATHY

## A True Leader Skill

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*To lead successfully, a person must demonstrate two active, essential, interrelated traits: expertise and empathy. In my experience, both of these traits can be deliberately and systematically cultivated; this personal development is the first important building block of leadership.*

—William G. Pagonis, *Leadership in a Combat Zone*

**I**N HIS CLASSIC 1991 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Leadership in a Combat Zone,” Lieutenant General Gus Pagonis outlines a path to effective leadership by focusing on the development of two fundamental leadership traits: expertise and empathy. There is little disagreement among military professionals that leaders must be proficient at systems management. But what about empathy? How did empathy, a word that conjures preconceptions of excessive sensitivity and interpersonal emotional connectivity, become a building block of leadership? The term seemingly would better apply to the realm of doctors and counselors than to those charged with fighting wars. As a professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, I found it intriguing that FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*, elevated empathy to an essential attribute for Army leadership. I began wondering if our middle-level Army leaders really understood its definition and applicability to a leadership climate. Attempting to satisfy my curiosity, I deliberately injected the concept of empathy into several classroom discussions. While most students understood the obvious definition of “placing yourself in someone else’s position,” few could elaborate on its specific application in operations and professional development. I looked at the doctrine, and found little on the application of empathy:

Army Leaders show a propensity to share experiences with the members of their organizations. When planning and deciding, try to envision the impact on Soldiers and other subordinates. The ability to see something from another person’s point of view, to identify with and enter into another person’s feelings and emotions, enables the Army leader to better care.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it so important to see things from the Soldier’s point of view, to “identify with and enter into another person’s feelings and emotions?” The U.S. involvement in extended operations and its focus on counterinsurgency, has brought a renewed awareness of war’s human dimension. Humans desire supportive relationships, and empathy is the foundation that builds trusting relationships. The leader who harnesses the power of real empathy fosters

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PHOTO: Two U.S. Soldiers clear the halls and classrooms of the recently refurbished Al Faw Middle School in the Sadr City district of Baghdad, Iraq, 11 August 2008. (U.S. Air Force, TSGT Cohen A. Young)

better communication, tighter cohesion, stronger discipline, and greater morale throughout his or her organization.

In this article I discuss empathy, its elements, and its role in fostering trust by building relationships within the organization. A close examination of personal and professional development will demonstrate how essential empathy is for creating trusting relationships among subordinates and leaders. Finally, I will discuss empathic awareness and how to overcome the “empathy deficit.” Many leaders are not empathetic by nature, and for them it must become an acquired skill. With a few simple techniques and the will to develop this foundational attribute, leaders will discover improved relations in both their professional and personal lives.

## Empathy in Leadership

Empathy is an abstract tool that leads to tangible results.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, the Melbourne Business School’s Mount Eliza Center for Executive Education initiated the Leadership Index Project, for which they interviewed over 627 business and organizational leaders. The survey captured the specific issues and concerns of managers in Australian organizations. It also demonstrated how the challenges faced by these managers are similar to or different from those of their counterparts, both regionally and globally. The survey found that, out of 20 leadership qualities, empathy and caring toward employees ranked 4th.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging theories on leadership clearly illustrate this course. A predominate characteristic of these new approaches is the term “empathy.” Typically, in classroom discussions, concepts like “compassion,” “pity,” and “sympathy” often emerge as components of the definition. While often used interchangeably, these terms possess very different meanings in the emotional connections among humans. Sympathy is the most general term. It ranges from friendly interest in another’s taste or opinion to emotional identification, often accompanied by deep tenderness. Pity has the strongest emotional connotation. Pity might sometimes suggest a tinge of contempt for one who is thought to be

inferior because of suffering or inherent weakness. There is also a frequent suggestion that the effect, if not the purpose of pity, is to keep the subject in the weakened or inferior state. Compassion, originally meaning fellowship between equals, has come to denote imaginative or emotional sharing of distress or misfortune with others considered or treated as equals. It implies tenderness and understanding as well as an urgent desire to aid or spare. It implies greater dignity than pity, but also greater detachment in the subject. Empathy has the least emotional content; it describes an often-cultivated gift for vicarious feeling, but the feeling need not be one of sorrow.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Carl Rogers, the famed psychotherapist and pioneer in humanist psychology defined empathy this way:

Empathy means entering into the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it...To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another’s world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside yourself.<sup>5</sup>

So while empathy is an emotional connection with the other person, it is not based on sorrow, guilt, suffering, or weakness, but on developing a mutual relationship. To understand another’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, concerns, and motives, we need to use our cognitive abilities to

stop and think about the other person’s perspective. We need to have the emotional capacity to care for that person’s concern. Caring does not mean we agree with their positions, logic, or views, or that we would change our positions; but it does mean we would be in tune with what that person is going through. We need to acknowledge their thoughts, feelings, and concerns.<sup>6</sup> Empathy is often associated with sensing another’s feelings.<sup>7</sup> Many people believe that it is the single most important quality in developing human relationships, and most consider it a learned skill.<sup>8</sup>

In the field of organizational development, empathy implies risk on the part of the leader. It requires increasing one’s level of humility and lowering one’s perceived position of power. As the leader

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demonstrates empathy, he reveals his feelings and values to the organization.

Empathy is the ability to express one's own emotions maturely, and it represents a complex skill that varies among individuals. It can develop positive relationships and improve problem-solving and decision-making abilities, and lead to fulfillment of personal goals and greater organization development.<sup>9</sup>

## Organizational Development

Organizational structures can be mechanistic or organic. Mechanistic structures are the traditional hierarchical arrangements featuring clearly defined roles, centralized control and decision-making, predictable and accountable skills, close supervision, and information flowing vertically from the top to the bottom. Within a mechanical structure, standardization via standard operations procedures are the norm, as are status conscious leadership and slow, steady performance promotion. This rigid structure is typical for stable, unchanging environments.

On the opposite end of the organizational spectrum are organic structures. Organic structures promote flexibility to respond to rapidly changing environments. They decentralize and relax decision-making roles and authority, encouraging the development of new kinds of job skills that can respond to continuously changing tasks. Rules are relaxed which promotes and rewards the flow of new and creative ideas throughout the organizations. The organic organizational climate encourages employees from different career fields, branches, and backgrounds to work together at solving problems by exchanging information and promoting teamwork and creativity within the organization. Over time, specific norms and values develop, emphasizing personal competence, expertise, and the ability to act in innovative ways. Typical of organic structure

is trust, empowerment, knowledge management, and open communications via networks.<sup>10</sup>

Businesses in highly competitive and constantly changing environments, such as the technological and prescription drug industries, reflect many organic characteristics. The constantly changing and complex nature of counterinsurgency and full spectrum operations has forced the U.S. Army to transform toward a more organic structure.

## Tough Empathy

Robert Goffee and Gareth R. Jones provide a simple, yet profound suggestion in their article, "Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?" Their answer to the title's question is that those who inspire us should lead us by—

- (1) selectively showing their weakness (revealing humility and vulnerability), (2) relying on intuition (interpreting emerging data), (3) managing with tough empathy (caring intensely about employees and about the work they do), and (4) and revealing their differences (showing what is unique about themselves).<sup>11</sup>

The concept of "tough empathy" is gaining in popularity among business leaders and behavioral scientists. Its intent is to separate real, applicable empathy from the vague academic applications found in earlier interpersonal relations theory. Chris Sattlerwaite, CEO of Bell Pottinger Communications, adheres to the concept of "tough empathy" by rejecting the soft kind of definition defined in much management literature. He adeptly handles the challenges of managing creative people while making tough decisions. "If I have to, I can be ruthless," he says. "But while they're with me, I promise that my people will learn something."<sup>12</sup>

Tough empathy means giving people what they need, not what they want. One must accomplish this by balancing respect for the individual and concern for the tasks, not easy to do in a highly competitive, ever-changing environment. The central characteristic of tough empathy is the devotion of a leader to his followers and the desire to assist them professionally and personally. In contrast to lax, easy leaders, those that practice tough empathy require firm, direct, and value-driven action that does not sacrifice standards but remains sensitive to ensuring followers grow and develop during the process.

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Tough empathy demonstrates a thorough understanding of the follower's views or predicaments. As Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee point out, it means expressing emotions, not stifling them.<sup>13</sup> A leadership climate fostering tough empathy enhances individual relationships and trust, and thus strengthens the organization.

There are few better examples of "tough" empathy than those demonstrated by the leaders of Sergeant Alvin C. York. When drafted, York, a devoted Christian, informed his commanders, Captain E.C.B. Danforth, commander, G Company, 328th Infantry, 82d Division, and Major George E. Buxton, commander, 328th Infantry Battalion, 82d Division, that he did not believe in killing. The examples of Major Buxton and Captain Danforth speak to us today. Recognizing a potential leader and a natural Soldier, these men gave hours of their precious time to help Private York work through his spiritual conflicts. They even placed him on leave for two weeks to ponder his decision. Because of their patience and understanding, they were able to place themselves clearly in York's position and understand this dilemma. York, in turn, was able to fully commit himself to his duties, and he ultimately saved his regiment from defeat.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever drives young people to the recruiting offices today, they typically share three common needs with their civilian counterparts: the need of affiliation, the need of achievement, and the need for power.<sup>15</sup> Attuned empathetic leaders will not only understand these three desires, but also create a strong sense of unit cohesion and teamwork. In low-trust environments, the single most important factor in determining trust and credibility is perceived caring, empathy, and commitment. Vincent T. Covello, director of the Center for Risk Communication and a leading expert in crisis communications, maintains that people often



**LTC James A. Swords, commander, Warrior Transition Unit, 10th Mountain Division, visits his Soldiers and their families assigned to Ft. Drum, NY, 9 February 2009.**

DOD, MCS1 Chad J. McNeeley

decide if the communicator is caring, empathic, and committed within the first two minutes of a communication, and often in as little as nine to thirty seconds. The judgment, once made, is often highly resistant to change.<sup>16</sup> Growing evidence suggests that individuals respond to leaders if their displays of empathy make them feel understood and valued. The empathic behavior of the strong leader encourages followers, instilling a high level for affiliation. The follower then perceives a strong collective identity and shows organizational citizenship behavior directed toward the leader and the co-workers. Emergent relationships stemming from empathy tend to

enhance perceptions of the leader's integrity and credibility and tend to engender cooperation and trust.

The knowledge and understanding gained from this sense of empathy enables leaders to influence followers' emotions and attitudes, including feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, and optimism in support of the corporate goals and objectives.<sup>17</sup> Groups will thus be highly cohesive. If leaders are meeting the need for affiliation, high levels of achievement are likely to follow as professional development increases and trust grows.

Professional and personal counseling is a fundamental organizational development tool for military officers. Performance counseling is a relatively new organizational development concept deriving from Dr. Carl Rogers' 1940s research in psychoanalysis. What Dr. Rogers coined as "person centre therapy" featured a move away from directed solutions, to individual problems and to more personal relationships with his patients. This therapy helped them realize that they can help themselves. He did this by pushing the person toward growth and emphasizing immediate and future performance versus the past. By moving the responsibility for growth



and development away from the counselor and on to the patient, a greater sense of self-worth and confidence developed.<sup>18</sup>

The Army's counseling methods are ostensibly no different. Army regulations require leaders at all levels to conduct periodic performance counseling, yet the majority of my students report that professional performance counseling is sporadic at best. Ironically, performance counseling is the primary method to meet the followers' need for affiliation and there is no better tool to promote an empathic climate. When properly conducted, counseling requires humility and openness. The leader facilitates a dialog with the Soldier as they discuss individual performance and create development plans. The leader must be patient, focus clearly on the Soldier, and listen to his responses. The leader has to demonstrate his ability not only to influence the Soldier but also to be influenced by the Soldier, who can speak freely on issues he or she feels are important not only to the Soldier, but also to the organization.

An observant leader closely watches the Soldier's body language and listens for the emotion. This allows the Soldier to express personal views, provide insight, and feel like a valued member of the team. The leader's empathic behavior results in valuable insights into the wants, needs, and perceptions within the organization. According to Stephen Covey's classic, *Principle Centered Leadership*:

Counseling is an overt demonstration of caring and is likely to contribute to the development of an active bond and identification with the leader. Sincerely listening to their views and concerns, and assisting them in their professional development in the solution of a personal problem, clearly illustrates the value the leader places in the Soldier . . . An attitude of empathy is enormously attractive because it keeps the leader open and others feel that the leader is learning and is influencable . . . Empathy means being open to new learning and change. The key to the leaders influencing them is their perceiving that they have influence with the leader.<sup>19</sup>

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Trust between the leader and the led often begins with counseling. As Soldiers become more skilled and more professional, the opportunities increase through competition and

promotion. Once a leader trusts a subordinate, he gives the subordinate greater responsibility and power.

Counseling ideally represents the merger of humility and empathy; without humility, true empathy will not occur. Empathic analysis of an employee or organization may determine the type of leadership style applied. As author Stephen Covey explained, "The human dynamic is just another variable in a complex organizational environment and a leadership style is adapted to harness the full potential of each employee."<sup>20</sup>

Borrowing portions from a case study authored by Matt Broaddus, a leadership professor at the Army's Command and General Staff College, titled "If I Could Do It All Over Again . . .," here is an illustration of empathic counseling:

Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell had been in command for year. The battalion deployed to Afghanistan in May just one month after he assumed command. It was the six-month point of the deployment, and the days had become an indistinguishable frantic blur of moving from one potential disaster to the next. The mission was exceptionally demanding, the battalion was stretched thin, and the personnel were performing tasks for which they were not trained to accomplish. Conditions on the newly established forward operations base (FOB) were tough; the weather had changed from very hot to extremely cold with persistent wind and sudden dust storms making breathing difficult and staying clean impossible. Meals (T-Rations and MREs) were monotonous; sleep tents were over crowded and hot showers were infrequent. Over the past month, Captain Pete Smith, the Alpha Company Commander, once a strong, motivated, and highly competent combat leader, had changed. He had become withdrawn and only communicated when required. He continually had a pained look

on his face and Mitchell felt that he was avoiding him. Additionally, Alpha Company's performance was slipping. As LTC Mitchell pondered the method of counseling CPT Smith, he first considered a direct, one sided, performance counseling. The old "wire-brush method" he employed as a young company commander. This one sided approach was easy and would put Smith "on notice"; clearly outlining the corrective actions he must take to keep his job. However, as he assessed Smith's past performance and behavior, he realized that something was amiss. Performance does not just drop without a reason. He made a few notes, grabbed his helmet, and proceeded to find CPT Smith. He found him at his vehicle assisting the driver performing maintenance. As he approached, Smith came to attention but showed no emotion. After receiving a quick update, LTC Mitchell asked Smith to take a walk with him. They walked to the vehicle and after excusing the crew, climbed into the rear of the truck. LTC Mitchell removed his helmet and invited Smith to do the same. He explained the circumstances of their meeting and then asked a few, carefully selected questions concerning the unit's performance. LTC Mitchell carefully listened and observed CPT Smith's reactions. He did not interrupt, only listened and watched. LTC Mitchell respectfully affirmed his answers, and followed with more detailed, leading questions concerning CPT Smith's personal life and events at home. LTC Mitchell observed from CPT Smith's haggard appearance, evasive answers and unsettled disposition that there was more to the story. This was one of his best, most respected company commanders, whose performance in combat had been remarkable. Mitchell was patient, understanding and empathic toward Smith. Finally, after several minutes, CPT Smith admitted that his only son, five year old Jake, had recently been diagnosed with lymphoma and would begin chemotherapy in a few days. His prognosis was uncertain. While his wife was strong, she was

beginning to break under the pressure and anxiety. CPT Smith felt trapped. He was torn between his loyalty to his family and to his men. The guilt and stress were seriously impacting him. Mitchell empathized with Smith's position, having experienced cancer in his own family. CPT Smith was too distracted to effectively lead his company. While LTC Mitchell did not want to "temporarily lose" one of his best commanders, it was best for both Smith and the company to allow him to return to care for his extremely ill child and emotionally drained wife. It made good business sense, shaped CPT Smith as a future leader, and created a positive impact on the entire battalion.<sup>21</sup>

The results of Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell's counseling will have lasting positive effects on the entire organization. As the leader nurtures an empathic climate, the organization becomes more cohesive and caring. The followers desire to emulate their leader, and an empathic climate permeates throughout the organization. It manifests itself through better unit performance, fewer disciplinary actions, fewer stress related issues and incidents, and greater loyalty toward the organization.

## Techniques for Developing Empathy

Martinuzzi notes that "Empathy is the emotional muscle that gets stronger as you use it."<sup>22</sup> Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee also endorse this idea:

Empathic people are superb at recognizing and meeting the needs of clients, customers, and subordinates. They seem approachable, wanting to hear what people have to say. They listen carefully, noticing what people are truly concerned about and they respond on the mark. Tuned out, despondent leaders are one of the main reasons talented people leave organizations and take the companies' knowledge with them.<sup>23</sup>

Can leaders become more empathic? Like many areas of leadership theory, the elevation of empathy to a fundamental attribute raises some debate. The central questions appear to be:

- Can leaders be successful without developing empathy?
- Is empathy a developed leadership attribute?

**Empathy and success.** Walt Disney producer Manly Kaplan says, “I’ve known leaders who have none of it [empathy] and nevertheless were leaders, but those that have it have moved and inspired me more.”<sup>24</sup> Many of the best leaders are empathic leaders. They are able to gauge the organization’s mood by taking its emotional pulse. On this subject, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee remarked—

By being attuned to how others feel at [any] given moment, a leader can say and do what is appropriate whether it means calming fears, assuaging anger, or joining in good spirits... The key is making intelligent decisions that work those feelings into positive actions that achieve the organizational goals and objectives.<sup>25</sup>

Army leaders today operating in remote, dangerous, ambiguous environments, can surely identify with the empathy demonstrated by Lieutenant Rick Rescorla, a platoon leader in Bravo Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, fighting in Vietnam during November 1965. In General Moore’s account of the Battle of Landing Zone X-Ray in the Ia Drang River Valley, Lieutenant Rescorla, a seasoned veteran of the British Army and its operations in Cyprus and Rhodesia, exhibited a truly memorable act of empathy while leading his platoon in combat. After surveying the ground from the enemy’s point of view, Rescorla repositioned his lines in anticipation of the North Vietnamese attack. During the long first night on Landing Zone X-Ray, sensing the tension and fear permeating throughout the platoon, he encouraged talk between the foxholes to ease the tension. “When all else failed,” he sang “Wild Colonial Boy” and a Cornish favorite, “Going Up Camborne Hill,” slow and steady tunes, which were answered with shouts of “Hard Core!” and “Garry Owen!,” which told him his men were standing firm.<sup>26</sup>

Thirty-five years later, Rick Rescorla again resorted to song to soothe the fears of those in his

charge as vice president of security for Morgan Stanley, the brokerage firm which occupied 22 floors of the south tower of the World Trade Center. As thousands of Morgan Stanley employees evacuated the tower, Rescorla sang to the frightened evacuees just as he had sung to his Soldiers that long night in Vietnam. “He sang ‘God Bless America.’ He sang the songs of the British Army in the Zulu Wars. He sang the old Welsh miner songs.”<sup>27</sup>

All the Morgan Stanley employees escaped the collapse and this brave, determined, yet empathic old Soldier was last seen alive heading up the stairs with New York firefighters. Rick Rescorla is only one example of many successful empathic leaders. Leadership icons such as Washington, Grant, Lee, Bradley, and Powell exhibited levels of empathy. So while most leaders have some degree of empathy, the great leaders have mastered empathy.

**A developed leadership attribute.** Like most leadership skills, once the leader is personally aware of the deficiency, methods exist to improve it. According to K.M. Lewis of K.M Lewis Leadership Consulting—

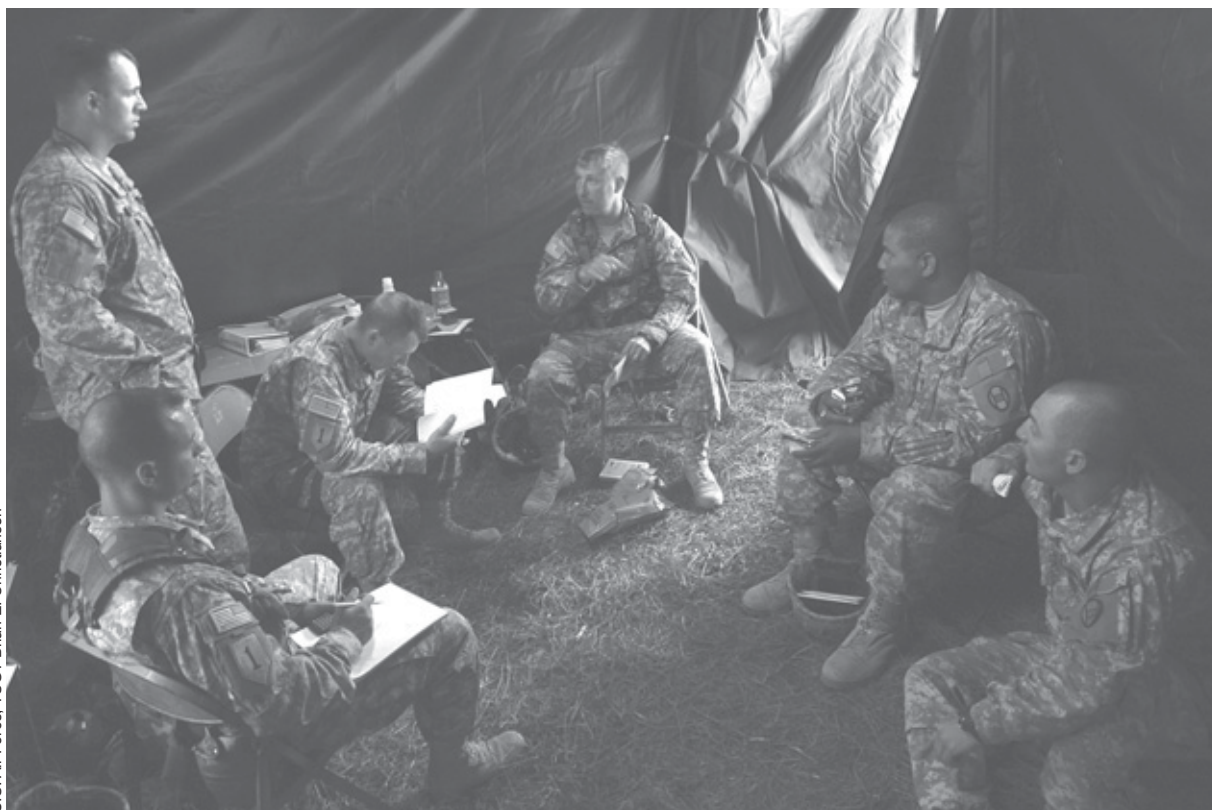
It first begins with the sincere desire to modify your behavior; an acceptance that empathy is not only an important leadership skill but also critical life skill, applicable to every personal relationship. There is little disagreement that those who can read another’s emotions are more effective at interpersonal relationships.<sup>28</sup>

However, can leaders overcome their empathy deficit? Unquestionably, the process starts with a self-assessment. There are numerous leader assessment tools available, but no matter the tool utilized, an improvement plan must follow. Empathy is not a natural trait or skill for many people. The complexity of empathy lies in the fact that it requires a mastery of empathic listening. Of all the leadership attributes and skills, listening may be the most important.<sup>29</sup>

Empathic listening is often used synonymously with “active listening” or “reflective listening,” but empathic listening differs by its focus on control. In effect, active and reflective listening rarely digest the full, physical or emotional meaning transmitted from the communicator and never reach a full appreciation for the communicator’s “point of view.”<sup>30</sup> As Baldoni says, empathic listening

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U.S. Air Force, TSGT Brian E. Christiansen



**A U.S. Army lieutenant colonel listens during a commanders' meeting at Camp Shelby, MS, 19 April 2007.**

“creates a powerful dynamic of human interaction permitting people to feel as though they have been heard, really heard. This is one of the best ways to build trust and lasting relationships with another human being.<sup>31</sup> Empathic listening is thus a deeper level of listening—a discipline of extending yourself for others by really working to “see it as they see it and feel it as they feel it.”

Martinuzzi provides several other essential actions leaders can take to improve their empathy:

- Don't interrupt. Do not dismiss, do not rush, do not challenge.
- Increase your ability to understand other's nonverbal communications because often people do not openly communicate what they feel.
- Practice the 93 percent Rule. Words account for 7 percent of the total message communicated. The other 93 percent communicated is in body language. Frowning, yawning, or looking at one's watch, demonstrate a lack of interest and understanding.
- Be fully present. Do not do other things while communicating. Do not email, take calls, work on paperwork. This is disrespectful and demonstrates you have other priorities.

- Smile. Demonstrate a good attitude—an attitude that you want to be there.

- Encourage people, particularly the quiet ones. Affirm what they said and ask lead-in questions to seek clarity.

- Show people you care by taking an interest in them. Show genuine curiosity about their lives. Ask questions about hobbies, their challenges, their families, and their aspirations.

- When you visit a subordinate, don't stand while you talk. Sit down and get on the same level.

- Have a finger on the pulse of a department or organization. Learn to read the mood.

- Train your employees to be empathic.<sup>32</sup>

While not exclusive, this list provides a good starting point for developing an empathic character.

## Application

Unlike many definitions of leadership, the Army's characterization found in FM 6-22 *Army Leadership* squarely places an additional obligation on its leaders for “improving the organization.”<sup>33</sup> General Creighton Abrams eloquently summarized the Army organization: “Soldiers are not in the Army.



Soldiers are the Army.”<sup>34</sup>

Empathy is not pity, compassion, or sympathy, but a developed skill that builds trust, improves communication, and fosters relationships within organizations and with others outside. Our Soldiers are smart, innovative, adaptable, and creative. They are technologically savvy and strongly desire to accomplish the mission. Empathic personal and professional development fosters a leadership climate that respects individuals

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and establishes a foundation for individual and organizational learning.

Empathy, though a misunderstood word, is a leadership skill, one so significant that the Army raised it to one of its

twelve leadership attributes. Empathic leadership is a powerful interpersonal skill, one that—when cultivated and applied—will enhance human relationships and build a better, more successful organization. **MR**

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34. Creighton Abrams, quoted in *A Better War* by Lewis Sorley (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1999), 370.

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## Errata - 9 November 2018

Corrections to the passage corresponding to note 31:

As [Hunter] says, empathic listening creates a "powerful dynamics of human interaction" permitting people to "feel as though they have been heard, [r]eally heard"; this is "one of the best ways . . . to build trust" and lasting relationships "with another human being."<sup>31</sup>