Empathetic Leadership

Understanding the Human Domain

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A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others.

—Anonymous

You have just arrived to your new assignment and stepped into a key billet in a joint organization. Unlike your last job, where everyone wore the same uniform and shoulder insignia, you quickly realize the diverse experiences and expectations of your team.

Your deputy is an officer from an allied nation, and your first interaction was cold and formal, almost curt. You thought you were polite and positive, so you struggle to account for her response. You think, "Is this part of her personality or culture? Or is it just the result of a rough day? Is she like this toward everyone or just toward me?"

Your senior enlisted advisor is from a sister service, and while you really hit it off, you can sense some frustration. He is aggressive and self-confident, attributes that have served him well but are liabilities here. As you reflect, you wonder, "How does he feel about this assignment and his role in it? How does he perceive his coworkers and subordinates?"

The civilian administrative assistant has seventeen years in this command, and you are the seventh officer to hold this position during his tenure. While clearly knowledgeable and well-connected, you sense in him an air of superiority bordering on disdain. Though initially irritated, you ask yourself, "What would it be like to be in his situation? What assumptions has he made about me?"

Leadership is not easy. Each individual that we work with is a complex set of personality and experiences, hopes, and fears. While every good leader tries to get to know his or her soldiers, only the truly exceptional ones go beyond the surface level. They pay close attention to verbal and nonverbal cues, and ask tough questions to better understand the experience, perspective, and feelings of individuals. In short, they have honed and applied the skill of empathy, a critically important but often misunderstood element of leadership.

Unfortunately, while more and more professions are incorporating empathy into their practice, the U.S. military has mostly avoided the topic. Sure, it holds a small place in our leadership doctrine and in our flag officers' speeches, but we still fail to comprehend what empathy is and why it is so important for leaders. We propagate an unspoken belief that this skill is necessary only for caring professionals—doctors, nurses, clergy, and counselors—and is of no tangible benefit to the profession of arms.[1]

Yet, at its heart, empathy is about understanding people—namely how one's worldview (cognitive) and emotions (affective) drive behavior.[2] It is primarily a mental task—the detailed observation of human terrain, comparable to a commander's careful study of contour lines on a map—and thus can be developed. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and retired U.S. Army Gen. Martin Dempsey asserted it to be an important acquirable skill: "Effective Leaders have a sense of empathy. They listen. In listening they learn. In learning they become empathetic."[3] Like other critical skills, we will grow in empathy as we practice it.

Is there another profession that needs to grasp the complex human domain more than the military, where trust is our currency and lives hang on our decisions? How can we expect to influence and motivate diverse members of joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) and multicomponent organizations to accomplish inherently emotional missions without first seeking to learn what makes them tick?[4] This article will argue that today's military leader must properly understand, develop, and apply empathy to build cohesive teams and make better decisions in future operating environments.

Understanding Empathy

To avoid the common misconceptions about empathy, it is helpful to look at its origins and recent use. Nineteenth-century German psychologist Theodore Lipps coined the term "in-feeling" to describe the ability of a counselor to imaginatively enter the thoughts, emotions, and perspectives of a client both to build rapport and gain understanding.[5] Since that time, the emphasis on empathy has expanded throughout the medical profession. Doctors and nurses try to assume the viewpoint of the patient in order to provide more considerate care. In recent years, empathy has even moved into the boardroom as corporate executives try to better understand their employees and customers. These examples are useful both for the truths they affirm and the misconceptions they dispel.

First, empathy is not about one's own feelings of sadness or overwhelming concern. The psychologist who is thinking of his or her feelings is not paying attention to those of his or her clients. As retired U.S. Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal recently explained,

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Previous page: Gen. James C. McConville, then vice chief of staff of the Army, listens to views of soldiers assigned to 6th Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, 22 July 2019, during his visit to Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Spc. Matthew J. Marcellus, U.S. Army)

"Empathy is not sympathy. It doesn't mean that you rub [your soldiers'] bellies and ask them how they feel every morning. What it means is that you can see [the situation] through their eyes."[6] Military leaders must not confuse empathy with "going soft." The goal is to learn what motivates a person or group. What leader, no matter how gruff, could honestly say, "I don't want to understand my soldiers or environment better"? While sincere concern and compassion may occur as a by-product, empathy is about gaining understanding, not generating personal feelings.[7]

Nor is empathy about having shared experiences with others. It is unlikely that the doctor had the same procedure as his or her patient nor that the executive had the same purchasing experience as his or her customer, but that does not preclude them from taking an empathetic perspective. It is not necessary to "walk a mile in another man's shoes" to imagine what it might be like for an individual and respond accordingly.[8] In the military, we often have similar personal or professional experiences as our subordinates. However, the sentiment of "I know what you are going through" paradoxically inhibits empathetic learning as the leader exports his or her own thoughts and feelings into the situation, rather than looking for new insights. While commonalities can aid understanding, in truth, we learn more when we minimize apparent similarities and take a mental posture of curiosity.

The professional, therefore, applies empathy to gain understanding and make better decisions. His or her goal is not to generate sympathy nor to find common ground but to create better outcomes for those he or she serves. As psychiatrist and business consultant Prudy Gourguechon instructs, "Empathy is a neutral data-gathering tool that enables you to understand the human environment within which you are operating … and therefore make better predictions, craft better tactics, inspire loyalty, and communicate clearly."[9] If this skill can work in civilian occupations, could it also benefit the profession of arms?

Empathy in Doctrine

In 2006, while heavily engaged in stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. Army reconsidered its leadership doctrine and asked the question, "What are we missing?" After surveying the operational environment and the challenges facing commanders, it was decided to add "empathy" under the character portion of the Army Leadership Requirements Model.[10]

Was it right to do so? The inclusion of such a "soft" concept into Army leadership doctrine has puzzled and surprised military insiders and outside observers alike.[11] We still perceive it as an emotional ability rather than an analytic tool to build stronger teams and make better decisions. This collective error begins with the way we have addressed empathy in doctrine. Perhaps that is why empathy remains such a marginalized aspect of Army instruction and culture, despite regular pleas to expand its role.[12]

First, we continue to conflate empathy and sympathy; the former is a cognitive process, while the latter is an emotional reaction. The definition of empathy provided in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, is sound, if not simplistic: "Identifying and understanding what others think, feel, and believe."[13] However, the subsequent clarifying doctrine only muddies the issue, encouraging leaders to "genuinely relate to another person's situation" and even "share … someone else's feelings."[14] The problem with this concept of empathy is twofold: it presumes shared experiences or emotions where they may not exist, and where they do exist, it encourages the leader to go beyond being a curious observer to an emotional participant, a counseling lapse known as overidentification. Recently, this conflation was evident when a former brigade commander cautioned a class of midgrade officers that empathy is a potential weakness when one is moved to have too much compassion.[15] This statement shows a confusion of the concept since deeper understanding is never a liability. It is important to distinguish the ability to grasp the feelings, motives, and perspective of another person from one's personal, emotional response.

Second, we categorize empathy as a leader attribute (i.e., what a leader is) rather than a competency (i.e., what a leader does). The distinction is subtle but important because, for the most part, we do not train attributes, especially character attributes. We may talk about their importance and briefly assess them on evaluations, but we do not put a concentrated effort into their development. Moreover, we wrongly assume that most character traits are innate and cannot be developed. As a battalion commander told his newly arrived chaplain, "I am not very empathetic. I need your help to know when I'm being too tough."[16] While his

Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Bill Moran speaks to sailors 3 August 2018 during an all-hands call at Naval Base San Diego, California. Moran also visited San Diego-based ships USS *Harpers Ferry* (LSD 49), USS *Stockdale* (DDG 106), USS *Montgomery* (LCS 8), and USS *Ardent* (MCM 12) to speak with sailors about the current and future status of the Navy as well as to receive feedback on Navy programs, policies, and procedures. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Nancy C. diBenedetto, U.S. Navy)

self-awareness is commendable, he chose to delegate a weakness rather than strengthen it. Perhaps this is due to our perception of empathy as an intrinsic attribute, which some possess and others lack, rather than an important skill that a leader can practice and develop.

Third, we view empathy primarily within organic military units. The emphasis in doctrine is that commanders use empathy in order to better care for soldiers, Department of the Army civilians, and families.[17] While important, this perspective is much too narrow, minimizing its utility in JIIM organizations and partnerships, as well as in the operational environment.[18] In fairness, Army leadership doctrine does hint at empathy's broader applications, including "local populations, victims of natural disasters, and prisoners of war."[19] Yet, this interpersonal skill has not expanded into other facets of doctrine relating to the human domain, from developing cohesive teams to influencing foreign populations.

Applying Empathy

A military leader can—and should—use empathy to better understand his or her formation. This applies not just to individuals but to the collective emotions, thoughts, and perspectives of subordinate units as well. If leadership is "the process of influencing people," then the ability to understand the needs and desires of others is critical to leadership.[20] This task is difficult enough with a relatively homogenous group of service members within an organic unit. It is significantly more so in a JIIM organization with, for instance, a company of Navy Seabees, a contingent of National Guard logisticians, a team of FBI agents, and a battalion of Polish paratroopers, who each have his or her own unique culture, beliefs, and goals.

In 2011, the RAND Corporation published the results of a study titled "Developing U.S. Army Officers' Capabilities for Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational Environments." As a part of the research, the authors of the study interviewed over one hundred military officers and civilian officials to determine what knowledge, skills, and abilities are necessary for success in

a JIIM environment. While empathy was not specifically mentioned, the majority of respondents identified "people skills" as the most critical attribute in these situations:

> Interpersonal and other integration skills tend to be of primary importance in JIIM environments, in which success usually requires voluntary collaboration between independent organizations that are frequently pursuing different agendas.[21]

Understanding these diverse perspectives is an essential skill for a leader to possess in order to align various goals toward a common end state.

Just as a commander can use empathy to better understand his or her organization, he or she can apply the same skill to map the human terrain in the operational environment. The ancient Chinese war theorist Sun Tzu famously posited the critical importance of knowing both your enemy and yourself.[22] Surely, this principle extends beyond the science of war to the equally important human domain. Understanding the people in an area of operations—whether enemy, friendly, or neutral—require a posture of curiosity and the willingness to ask and answer empathetic questions:

- What has been their life experience to this point?
- How do they see the world and their role in it?
- What do they hope to achieve? What do they fear to lose?[23]

This type of empathy goes beyond mere cultural understanding or awareness in current operational doctrine.[24] While the study of culture can assist with empathy, it remains an outside perspective of what "they" think or believe. Empathy, in contrast, seeks to understand from the inside by temporarily seeing the world from another perspective.[25]

Furthermore, the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, has developed an excellent, empathetic tool that helps leaders see both themselves and their adversaries, as Sun Tzu prescribed. In this model, called the "4 Ways of Seeing," an observing group asks two questions about its own perceptions: How do we see ourselves? How do we see them? This is followed by two questions about the perspective of the observed group: How do they see us? How do they see themselves?[26] This fairly simple, but challenging, exercise can help a leader to overcome his or her own bias and grasp the viewpoint of another person, the very essence of empathy. The insight derived from this interrogative process can lead to better decision-making and ultimately, success in the operational environment.

Empathy is a powerful tool for understanding the human domain, both at home and abroad. There is, however, an important step between empathy and sound decisions. Fundamentally, the ethical question is: What should I do with these empathetic insights? One option is to dismiss the new understanding and proceed without concern for the impact on others. Still another response is to weaponize empathy, using it to gain leverage against a peer or to manipulate a subordinate. Neither action is consistent with the ethical values of the U.S. Army nor does either engender a relationship built on trust, the bedrock of our profession. Those who use empathetic understanding in this way are apathetic and callous; they are the epitome of toxic leaders.

A third reaction is to apply empathetic understanding to seek the best possible outcome for all parties. While this could be motivated by compassion and concern, as we have discussed, this type of feeling is not essential. Choosing to weigh the feelings and desires of another person in decision-making could derive from any one of the three major ethical models: a responsibility to care for subordinates and others (duty ethic), an adherence to personal or collective moral ideals (virtues ethic), or a desire to improve the situation for the people involved (consequentialism). Therefore, far from being "soft," empathy is a leadership tool to gain an understanding of the human domain and make sound moral decisions that will benefit the organization and positively shape the environment.

Conclusion

Empathy is the least understood trait of the Army Leadership Requirements Model but is arguably among the most important. Since war is "a fundamentally human endeavor," it is critical that commanders understand the human domain in order to build cohesive teams based on trust and to influence foreign populations.[27] The Army needs empathetic leaders who can apply this skill to difficult leadership and operational situations.

We need, therefore, to improve and elevate the role of empathy in U.S. Army doctrine. Within leadership doctrine, we must clarify its definition as an emotionally neutral skill used to better understand people. Empathy should also have a prominent place in doctrine related to building trust, especially when the cultural differences are great as in JIIM organizations or when operating with local nationals. Furthermore, we need to expand this concept into other aspects of Army operations that could significantly benefit from empathetic insight. These include, but are not limited to, information operations, civil affairs, public affairs, regionally aligned forces, security forces assistance brigades, and intelligence preparation of the battlefield. These operations require empathetic understanding; cultural awareness alone is insufficient.

Secondly, we need to emphasize the development and evaluation of empathetic skill in leaders. In the institutional domain, we ought to take full advantage of precommissioning and Noncommissioned Officer Education System opportunities to teach young leaders what empathy is and how it enables better understanding

Previous page: Lt. Col. Lyle Bernard, 30th Infantry Regiment, a prominent figure in the second amphibious landing behind enemy lines on Sicily's north coast, provides a personal update to Lt. Gen. George S. Patton on the ground situation 10 July 1943 near Brolo, Sicily. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

and decisions in the human terrain. In the operational domain, we need to coach and evaluate leaders to employ empathy as part of their leadership in both garrison and the operational environment. Lastly, we must encourage the self-development of empathy by using it as an important selection criterion for command and other key leadership billets. If people are central to both leadership and warfare, we need leaders who can decipher human terrain just as well as they can interpret a map.

The human domain is complex. Army leaders need empathy to better understand the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of people and thus make better decisions. Our soldiers deserve it, and our future success depends on it. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Though commonly attributed to Gen. Douglas McArthur, the original author of this quote is unknown.

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