

Empathic Leadership

I've written about leadership in prior *ISHN* articles. In March 1995, I discussed the characteristics of effective leaders, including honesty and integrity, compassion, motivation, self-confidence, thinking skills, expertise, and flexibility. And last June (1999), I distinguished between management and leadership, claiming that leaders, in contrast to managers, focus on process rather than outcome, educate before they train, give expectations instead of mandates, don't try to measure everything, and listen before speaking.

This article adds to these presentations with the introduction of a new term – empathic leadership. I've not seen this term used in the leadership literature, but I think it's an important and useful concept. It combines the characteristic of flexibility with the skill of empathic listening.

Last month, my *ISHN* article coined the term “empathic correction” which means essentially that we need to put ourselves in the other person's shoes before diagnosing a behavior-related problem and offering advice for improvement. Likewise, leaders need to take time to understand another person's perspective before giving direction, advice, or support. In other words, leaders need to listen with empathy and then lead with empathy. The result is empathic leadership.

Four Types of Leadership

Let's consider four different ways people can lead others. At any point in time leaders can coach, instruct, support, or delegate, depending on their empathic diagnosis of the situation. How do these four approaches to leadership differ?

The ABC Paradigm

You can understand the essential difference between these leadership approaches by recalling the basic ABC paradigm of behavior-based safety. “A” stands for activator or the various conditions or events that precede behavior (“B”) and thus direct it. The “C” of ABC refers to the consequences that follow behavior and influence whether the behavior will occur again. As such, consequences motivate behavior.

Leadership varies to the extent it provides direction (as a behavioral activator) and motivation (as a behavior-focused consequence). Sometimes it’s appropriate to offer a high degree of both direction and motivation when leading people, while at other times it’s best to limit specific direction and motivation when giving an assignment to an individual or work team. I refer to the former approach as coaching and the latter as delegating.

Coaching Leadership

Coaching typically involves a presentation of specific behaviors needed for a certain task, as well as feedback to pinpoint effective and ineffective behaviors. In other words, coaches give direction with a certain action plan and then follow-up with appropriate support and empathic correction. Periodic activators keep people on the right track, while intermittent consequences provide motivation to keep people going.

Delegating Leadership

There are times when it’s most appropriate for leaders to give an assignment in general terms (without specific directions) and to limit interpersonal behavior-focused feedback. The expectation is that team members are already motivated to do their best and will give each other direction, support, and feedback when needed. Plus, these

individuals are self-accountable (or responsible), and are expected to use self-management techniques (activators and consequences) to keep themselves motivated and on the right track.

Instructive Leadership

Some people are already highly motivated to perform well, but don't know exactly what to do. This is often the case with new hires. They want to make a good first impression, and the newness of the job is naturally motivating. They are nervous, however, because of response uncertainty. They aren't sure what to do in the relatively novel situation. In this case, leaders need to focus on giving behavior-focused instruction.

This type of leadership should also be the style of choice at most athletic events. Individuals and teams in a sports contest do not typically need motivation. The situation itself, from fan support to peer pressure, often provides plenty of extrinsic motivation. What the competitors need is specific instructional leadership to channel their motivation. They need to know what specific behaviors are needed to win in various situations. This said, my experience with athletic coaches is not consistent with this analysis. For example, are the half-time speeches of team coaches more likely to be directional or motivational?

Supportive Leadership

There are people and situations requiring more support than direction. Take, for example, the experienced worker who does the same set of tasks day after day. This individual doesn't need direction, but could benefit from periodic expression of sincere appreciation for a job well done.

There are times when experienced workers know what to do but don't perform up to par all of the time. This is not a training problem (see my *ISHN* article last December, 1999), but rather one of execution. Empathic leaders recognize this and provide the kind of support that increases motivation. This could involve broadening a job assignment, varying the task components, or assigning leadership responsibilities. But at least it includes the delivery of one-to-one recognition in ways that increase a person's sense of importance and self-worth.

The Critical Role of Empathy

So how can we know what leadership style to use? That's where empathy is critical. You need to assess the situation with empathy to determine whether coaching, instructing, supporting, or delegating is primarily needed. And given the dynamic characteristics of most work settings and the changing nature of people, you need to make this empathic assessment periodically per situation and worker.

Consider, for example, the new employee who needs directive leadership at first. Then, as he or she becomes familiar with the routine, more support than instruction is called for. Later, you decide to expand this individual's work assignment with no increase in financial compensation. This situation will likely benefit most with a coaching leadership style whereby both direction and support are needed, at least at first. Eventually, a delegating approach might be most appropriate, whereby varying assignments are given with only outcome expectations. These workers are able to manage themselves with self-direction and self-motivation. But these individuals do appreciate genuine words of appreciation when their leader's expectations are met.

Empathic leaders of work teams change their approach quite dramatically as groups become more familiar with team members and their mission. In the beginning, during the forming and storming stages of team progress, work groups need structure, including behavior-based direction and support. This implies coaching or directing leadership. Later, when the group members become familiar with each other's interests and talents, and progress to the norming and performing stages of team development, supporting and delegating leadership is usually most effective.

Don't Keep it a Secret

It is often beneficial to tell people what leadership style you plan to use in a particular situation. You might even ask permission for a particular approach, or ask the recipient what style they would prefer.

Making people aware of your leadership style is particularly useful when transitioning from one approach to another. For example, after determining that a person works effectively without your direction, you might announce a progression from directive to supportive or delegating leadership. And when a job assignment is made more complex, it's often useful to explain your need to assume a coaching role for a while until new behaviors are well learned and fluent.

Actually, empathic leadership works best when everyone involved understands this approach to helping people optimize their safe performance. Everyone should understand the four approaches to leadership and the two critical factors that determine the need for one style over others. Then people can request a certain leadership style from their flexible and empathic leaders.

From the prior discussion, the two critical characteristics of people which determine leadership style should be evident. Can you name them? One refers to an individual's knowledge or expertise in a certain situation, while the other is related to one's motivation to execute task-related behavior. Two "C" words cover these two factors – competence and commitment.

The Role of Competence and Commitment

When competence is high, people know what to do and therefore do not need directive leadership. However, they need supportive leadership when their motivation or commitment is low. This is particularly evident when workers perform irregularly or inconsistently. Their good days indicate they know what to do, while the occurrence of bad days suggest a motivational problem.

Causes of low commitment vary dramatically, from interpersonal conflict on the job to emotional upheaval at home. Such causes can only be discovered through empathic listening. At times, the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of a motivational problem requires special assistance. In this case, the best a leader can do is recognize a need for professional help and offer advice and support.

Coaching leadership is needed when both competence and commitment are relatively low. In this case, empathic leaders improve competence through specific direction and feedback, and increase commitment through statements of sincere appreciation and support. Anything that increases a person's perception of importance or self-worth on the job can enhance commitment. What does a particular individual need to make that happen? Answers are often not obvious nor straightforward, but an empathic leader listens, observes, and asks questions to find out.

Finally, delegation is appropriate when competence and commitment are high. Empathic leaders usually know when an individual or work team advances to this level because they have observed successive progress. But it's often useful to ask people whether they are ready for this style of leadership. If they say "no," then ask what they need to reach this stage. Do they need more competence through direction or more commitment through some kind of support the organization could make available?

In Conclusion

This article linked empathy with leadership, thereby introducing a new term – empathic leadership. The value of the term was reinforced by the identification of four different leadership styles which vary according to the degree of direction and motivation needed in a particular situation. Through empathic listening, observing, and questioning, the leader determines whether coaching, instructing, supporting, or delegating is most appropriate.

Coaching involves both direction and support, and is needed when a person's competence and commitment in a particular setting are relatively low. In contrast, delegating is relevant when people know what to do and are motivated to do it. They are both competent and committed, and can direct and motivate themselves. Then, delegating leaders provide clear expectations and show sincere appreciation for worthwhile work, but they enable self-direction and self-motivation.

When people are internally motivated to perform well but don't know how to maximize their efforts for optimal performance, empathic leaders focus on giving specific behavior-based directions. This is instructive leadership.

In some situations, people know what is needed for optimal performance, but don't always work at optimal levels. This reflects an execution problem which can't be solved with direction or training. Rather supportive leadership is needed. What kind of support is called for? This crucial question can only be answered through empathic listening, observing, and questioning.

Obviously, empathic leadership is not easy. It is not an efficient, quick-fix process. It takes extra time, along with special competence and commitment. Is it worth the effort? Well, consider the benefits of giving people the kind of leadership they need. And consider the sub-optimal performance that can result from insulting people with over-supervision or from confusing people with under-supervision.

Bottom line: Effective leadership can only be optimal after learning what kind of leadership is needed. How is this accomplished? The answer: empathic observing, listening, and questioning. The result: empathic leadership.

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