



THE POWER OF EMPATHY

“It is our privilege to give hope.” These were the words uttered by the Springbok (South Africa) rugby coach before his team clinched the Rugby World Cup Trophy in the final against England in Yokohama, Japan, in November 2019.

The word *pressure* is widely used to explain psychological stress—the burden of expectation, the feeling of being under the spotlight—and everyone experiences it in different ways. But one thing is certain: We all feel it. Imagine the immense pressure felt by the Springboks when they were about to play in a World Cup final match with a nation of people back home expecting them to be victorious. *That* is pressure.

But Rassie Erasmus, the Springboks’ rugby coach, had a different take on it. Pressure, he told his team, is not having a job and having to worry about how you will pay for your basic necessities. That is real pressure, he said. These words motivated his team to run out onto the field convinced of their ability to win because, now, the team was motivated by the needs of others over their own personal desire for success.

Adam Grant writes about this phenomenon in a wonderful book called *Give and Take*. Grant posits that the world is made up of *givers* and *takers* and another group called *matchers*. *Takers* see what they can get out of a given situation or how they can benefit themselves. *Givers* are about doing for others without any expectation for a return favor, simply for the feelings that they experience when giving. *Matchers* behave in a more quid-pro-quo fashion: I take, then I give, then I take, and, in the end I have given as much as I have taken. I am matching my taking with my giving. Life, it turns out, rewards the true givers the most. In the end, those who give freely and generously reap greater benefits than any taker will ever get by taking.

The all-powerful concept weaving through both of these examples is empathy. Empathy has a significant impact on our job satisfaction, motivation at work, and, ultimately, productivity. How does that work, you may wonder? In its most basic form, empathy displaces or neutralizes negativity. That’s all there is to it. If you are temporarily dissatisfied with a staff member’s attitude or by a patient who is seemingly being particularly difficult, the ability to temporarily see things from his or her point of view is an extremely powerful tool. It softens your negative emotions and opens the door to an equitable solution to the problem.

Research has shown that effective leaders rank empathy high among their skill sets. It is difficult to find a truly inspirational leader who lacks empathy. Leaders who recognize mental health as a priority are 90% more inclined to retain staff than those who do not.¹

How can workplace empathy benefit you and me? At work, we don’t know the hidden emotional burdens that those around us carry with them every day. When you reserve judgment, you tend to become curious about an unpleasant situation, and this can make a significant difference in how you respond to that situation and how this ultimately affects the morale in your workplace.

Gridlock is a term that we are all familiar with in reference to traffic. Gridlock can occur in our own psyches too, however, when we are stuck in our point of view and cannot see the issue from another viewpoint. Being gridlocked leads to a propensity for unfair judgment, criticism, and defensiveness, which certainly does not create an environment of learning or understanding.

Empathy is not about endorsing bad behavior or accepting subpar performance; rather, it is the ability to suspend your own point of view in order to try to understand the point of view of another person—thereby taking you out of your gridlock. It then allows you to respond with more maturity, less animosity, and less judgment and leads to fairer and more objective outcomes.

Self-empathy can also be beneficial. This is the act of not being too hard on yourself if, for example, you have a surgical complication, fail at a task, or disappoint yourself with a reaction to something. Empathy for yourself after a setback allows you to get back on top of the task faster and more effectively. It’s also widely acknowledged that the more self-compassionate you are, the more empathy you have to share with others. So remember to be kind to yourself, and you will find the act of being kind to others a little easier.

Getting back to the rugby; by thinking of those less fortunate people back in South Africa, the Springbok rugby team was able to bring ultimate glory upon themselves, and the resultant celebrations were country-wide thanks to their motivation, rather than just within a select group.

I challenge you to test yourself and see how far the act of giving and practicing empathy can take you in 2020, as we bring vision to our patients and the world. ■

1. Businessolver study reveals leadership experienced key shifts in perception of workplace empathy [press release]. *Businessolver*. March 27, 2019. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/businessolver-study-reveals-leadership-experienced-key-shifts-in-perception-of-workplace-empathy-300819273.html>. Accessed January 30, 2020.



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