

How Do I Keep My Employees Motivated?

THE PRACTICE OF
EMPATHY-BASED MANAGEMENT



GEORGE LANGELETT, PhD

“How Do I Keep My Employees Motivated?” is an imperative book for leaders in all fields. In order to motivate, you must be able to comprehend and connect on a personal level.”

—TOM DASCHLE, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader

“George Langelett brings clarity to elements of management that we cherish at Markel. He explores the ‘soft’ topic of empathy-based management in ways that are highly accessible to managers who are compelled by ‘hard’ logic. He describes the scientific underpinnings of why empathetic management is successful, and he gives clear steps for how managers can develop such a style.”

—ALAN I. KIRSHNER CHAIRMAN, CEO Markel Corporation

“I think this is an excellent book. Most books on motivation are either so heavy on theory and research that practicing managers may not know how to apply what’s in the book or else rely so heavily on anecdotes and personal experiences to the point where validity suffers. This book, though, gets it just right: it is based on sound theory and research but offers truly usable applications and advice.”

—DR. RICKY GRIFFIN, Department Head and Distinguished Professor of Management, Blocker Chair in Business, Mays Business School, Texas A&M University

“Individuals ... [responsible for] guiding an intergenerational workforce in a nation of opportunity must have tools to network people together using positive methods of supervision. This book is a must read for every leader who desires to maintain motivated employees.”

—SALLY DAMM, President & CEO, United Living Community

“Work has changed dramatically since relatively unskilled workers stood on production lines assembling widgets. Most work is highly skilled, complex, depends on teams, and requires judgment. In other words, it requires engaged employees at all levels. Management theory has evolved since the days of Scientific Management, but it has not always kept up. Dr. Langelett lays out the core goals of empathy-based management; establishes a practical and scientific foundation; and offers specific practices for work situations. To care about the work we do, it helps to care about the people with whom we work.”

—BOB ROWE, President & CEO, NorthWestern Energy

“What an eye-opening approach to establishing staff motivation that doesn’t need to start over with each new business cycle. Professor Langelett’s explanation of the use of empathy as a motivational tool is the blueprint companies need to build and retain a quality staff in today’s corporate America. The beauty of this concept is that it can be utilized staffwide as opposed to the traditional sales-only programs.”

—GREG FARGEN, President, BankStar Financial Corporation

“I was pleasantly surprised by this book. I expected either a prescription for a new rewards program or an inspirational read with few useful strategies. Instead, the role of empathy presented in this book is clear, scientifically based, and fascinating to comprehend. I spent more time thinking about our management practices than reading. I wish this book had been available years ago; it presents a much more satisfying explanation of effective supervision than the platitudes I was taught in business school.”

—LES HOWARD, Franchise Owner, Legacy Financial Partners

“I have shared [this book’s] wisdom and life-transforming content with a number of my colleagues. What sets it apart from the rest is how Dr. Langelett weaves the critical aspects of empathy into leadership practices and guiding people behaviors. It also sets a new foundation and more humanistic approach to motivating employees and guided mindfulness in the workplace when it comes to building quality relationships that sustain quality organizations and cultures.”

—ANNE BRUCE, author of *Discover True North*, *Manager’s Guide to Motivating Employees*, and *How to Motivate Every Employee*

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*Dedicated to Lara, Ian, and Ariana,
and to workers everywhere who
must endure unempathetic bosses.*

PREFACE

In his *Wall Street Journal* article dated April 24, 2009, “How Business Schools Have Failed Business,” Michael Jacobs asked several provocative questions in light of the 2008 collapse of the U.S. financial system. One of them was, “What have business schools failed to teach our business leaders and policy makers?” Jacobs pointed to corporate responsibilities and ethics and he ended his article with this challenge: “America’s business schools need to rethink what we are teaching—and not teaching—the next generation of leaders.”¹

Having taught management courses, including small business management and human resource management, at South Dakota State University for the past ten years, I had an unsettled feeling when I read Jacobs’s article. I realized that I was very concerned about contemporary management textbook prescriptions for “how to” instill ethics into our business students and future leaders. The problem is a compatibility issue within the theory taught in today’s college management courses, because motivation theory and behaviorism—or the use of rewards and punishments—is still widely taught. Offering people rewards inherently encourages the possibility of cheating and taking shortcuts in order to obtain the desired reward or outcome. This tendency contradicts my desire as an educator to instill ethical behavior within our future leaders.

Specifically, from my viewpoint as a college instructor, I have two fundamental concerns. First, the textbooks that I use in the classroom model employee decision making as a cognitive process in the employee’s brain. This approach contradicts my understanding of how we humans make decisions. Both cognitive and emotional considerations factor into every decision we make. Without our emotions, we cannot make decisions. This reality may contradict orthodox contemporary management theory, but it is well understood in the field of neuroscience. Neurologist Antonio Damasio, in his book *Descartes’ Error*, demonstrates that not only do emotions play a central role in our decision making, but our limbic region (the parts of our brain responsible for emotions) also regulates both our body’s reactions and our brain’s decision-making processes.

My second concern regards the assumed mechanism by which people become more ethical or unethical. The textbooks I use in class make suggestions, such as “Ethics starts at the top; employees will follow the manager’s behavior”; and, “Make it a company practice to hire ethical employees.” While these are excellent suggestions, they do not explain how a person becomes more ethical. Instead, they assume an employee is either ethical or unethical.

Contrary to practices in many companies today, a new hire does not become more ethical by reading the company handbook or by signing a statement of ethical behavior. Rather, for all of us, our behavior is determined by our desires and needs. If we view ethics as how we treat other people, the key to ethical behavior is an understanding of how our behavior affects the lives of others. Thus, empathy is the key to ethical behavior. The better a person understands how his or her actions affect other people, especially if they create hardship in others’ lives, the more likely the person will behave ethically toward other people. In contrast, if a person does not recognize how his own behavior affects the well-being of others, his treatment of others becomes irrelevant. From my dissatisfaction with the textbook prescription for instilling ethics in our business students and future leaders, I started on

journey to better understand human nature, ethics, and what motivates people, particularly long-term motivation.

Teaching management courses at South Dakota State University has given me an opportunity to find answers. I started my search by digging into the contemporary management literature in order to better comprehend this widespread problem of the lack of understanding of how employees make decisions, and thus how managers can effectively build meaningful connections with each employee in order to improve satisfaction and performance. Unfortunately, contemporary management theory presented in academic management textbooks is deficient in its approach to employee motivation. Therefore my journey in writing this book has been a quest to present a comprehensive alternative approach to managing employee behavior, namely, an approach that is equipped to address both motivational and ethical issues. In order to better understand human behavior, I turned my attention from management literature to neuroscience literature.

After studying recent findings by neuroscientists, I was convinced more than ever that empathy is critical for both understanding and guiding employee behavior. My purpose in writing this book is to explain the importance of empathy in management practices and how managers can learn to apply empathy in order to alter the work environment in a positive manner for everyone involved.

As I began this journey, I realized that a natural starting point for this book was to reflect on a time in my own life when I was motivated to give my very best effort. Not because someone was dangling the proverbial carrot in front of my nose, but because I found an inspirational atmosphere that engaged my mind as well as my heart. That time period was my favorite year in school, the seventh grade. The reason is because of my science teacher that year, Mr. Norman, and the attributes he embodied and consistently demonstrated to his students. I didn't know to call it "empathy" back then, but that is in essence what characterized his relationships with middle schoolers. Empathy was the core of his behavior which inspired me at a deeply personal level, and that is what I am striving to elaborate on in this book.

Each one of us—whether in the classroom or at work—desires to feel accepted and valued. We all are looking for someone who values us, enjoys working with us, and reciprocates our desire to form a close relationship. It is human nature to desire to find a mentor who unconditionally accepts us and with whom we enjoy working. When a mentor with whom we feel a personal connection is found, because we know that our mentor has our best interests in mind, we allow that person to help us through our problems and guide us along our journey in order to help us grow personally and to reach our potential. As our respect and esteem for that individual grow, we desire to please and work hard to perform at our highest ability. That secure bond becomes a source of purpose and motivation. Why and how does this occur? Further understanding of these issues is the focus of this book. I've written this book to present a new approach to motivation that will inspire the mind and earn the heart of each of your employees.

INTRODUCTION

If there is hope in the future, there is power in the present.

—ANONYMOUS

While in the heat of emotion, it is a very poor time to make any kind of decision.

—JIM FAY

What motivates people to work hard at any task? As a manager, what can you do to motivate your employees to be fully engaged and give their best effort at their respective jobs? These are two eternal questions that the science of management seeks to answer. Today, much of the current philosophy of management regarding workplace motivation is focused on inducements or incentives. While well-thought-out incentives motivate employees in the short term, they lose effectiveness over time. In almost every case, as soon as an incentive program ends, employees change their behavior, and job performance slips. Worse yet, over time employees come to expect a new incentive program will be installed to replace the old program. And if a new incentive program is not initiated, employee morale will fall due to unmet expectations.

While employees will work hard for the correct incentive, often this approach feels detached and impersonal. Employees may actually feel manipulated or even “bribed” by management through incentive programs. Thus, although a reward or a punishment may capture the employee’s attention and focus her effort as she responds according to the incentive, artificial inducements do not win the heart (loyalty) of each employee. Rather, employees are simply entering into an impersonal contract with management. So today managers are realizing that traditional practices of rewards programs often feel mechanical, manipulative, and bureaucratic. Consequently, the programs often do not produce satisfactory results with regard to desired changes in employee behavior.

Gary Latham’s book *Work Motivation* provides an in-depth review of the major theories of motivation developed during the twentieth century. During my reading, I was struck by two issues. First, the majority of the theories tended to focus solely on cognitive processes associated with human motivation. Recognition of human emotions and their effects on motivation was not a critical aspect of the influential management studies.

Second, I recognized something peculiar about business models of human motivation techniques: they were all man-made techniques. Each model tended to build on the work of previous published studies. Over time, this tendency drove the direction of the modeling of worker motivation behavior. Throughout much of the twentieth century, from Frederick Taylor to B. F. Skinner, prescriptions for motivating workers felt rather mechanical and emotionally detached.

I feel we have turned a corner and have started to better understand the nature of human motivation. Specifically, psychologists and managers have begun to model worker motivation as being influenced by both logic and emotions. Daniel Pink’s influential book *Drive* suggests that once worker compensation is sufficient, employees are motivated by three issues: autonomy (vs. being constantly supervised), purpose (being able to see how one’s work

better humanity), and mastery (the need to achieve professional excellence). All three are intrinsic or internal to each employee and are influenced by the neocortex (logical part) and the limbic (emotional) regions of our brains. After reading Pink's work, I am pleased that management literature is moving toward a better understanding of the nature of employee motivation.

Encouraged that managers understand that both logic and emotions influence the decisions that we make, I designed this book to help "push the envelope," or make further progress, in understanding how the human brain makes decisions, and how managers can both help employees make sound decisions and influence long-term motivation. I call this new approach empathy-based management. It is an alternative management approach that will allow you to connect with the hearts of each of your employees and create a work environment where they can be fully engaged, problem solve, and enjoy their work. This new approach is built on teaching you how to empathize, how to experience the emotions and comprehend the experiences of each of your employees.

If you look across professions outside of management, empathy is a key skill acquired for professional success. For example, years ago the counseling profession recognized that the key to helping each patient, despite the direst circumstances, was to give hope. Likewise, the marketing profession knows that salespeople who are able to empathize with customers are more likely to make a sale. During the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our military has been fighting against insurgents for the hearts and minds of the local populations. Our soldiers have learned that displaying empathy is the key to winning the hearts of the common people.

For you, a manager, the starting point for empathy-based management is the recognition that each person you employ is an individual with thoughts and feelings, dreams and fears, and a name. As you become more empathetic in dealing with each of your employees, their loyalty to and identification with you, their manager, and also the organization as a whole are strengthened. Within an environment where an emotionally secure foundation is laid, each employee grows personally and professionally, to the benefit of both individual workers and the organization as a whole.

Reflecting on my own work life, I have had a number of bosses who were self-absorbed and poor communicators, and a few who were very arrogant in spite of being incompetent. Although I have no idea of their true motives, their words and actions created within me feelings of being neither respected nor valued. I felt as though they viewed me as an object or an expendable resource rather than a person with thoughts, feelings, and useful insights.

Unfortunately, I have listened to similar stories from people of all walks of life. But upon further reflection, I no longer blame individual managers for their lack of insight into what motivates people to be loyal and work hard. Rather, I believe this lack of understanding is a systemic problem within today's corporate America, driven by ever-increasing expectations for continual growth in profitability. Every three months Corporate America is under pressure to report earnings in line with analysts' expectations. Consequently, we have overlooked the fact that at the most basic level, every person employed in your organization desires two things: (1) to be understood and (2) to be accepted as a unique individual. Performance is a separate issue: we need to know that our level of productivity is acceptable. But at a much deeper or primal level, we need to be accepted for our humanity. Un

workers feel unconditionally accepted for their own worth and human dignity, they will never be fully engaged in their work. They will work to comply, but they will put neither their hearts nor their loyalty into their jobs.

The underlying problem is that in order to be an effective supervisor and motivate employees, you, the manager, must matter to each worker. In order to matter, you must be able to relate to each employee on a personal level. If you do not matter, then you cannot help your employees reach their potential. If there is no emotional connection between manager and an employee, the manager is irrelevant to the employee. An irrelevant manager cannot influence each employee's attitudes, behavior, level of motivation, or professional growth.

Some managers may be slightly uncomfortable with the idea of developing a "personal relationship" with each employee, and occasionally I am asked to define a personal relationship. Think of entering into a personal relationship as the opposite of a manager maintaining "professional distance" from each employee. Although there most likely will be no interactions with your employees outside of work, during the eight hours each day spent together at work, you enjoy the camaraderie of your employees. You may occasionally join your employees during lunch or a coffee break, share stories or a joke, and bring leftover dessert from last night's supper. Outside of work, you might attend an employee's wedding or a funeral of a family member. You may buy Girl Scout cookies from your employees' daughters, cut out newspaper clippings of their children winning Little League games, or organize a company office pool during March Madness. The actual activities you participate in are not important. What is important is that your employees identify with you as the boss and as a close friend who sincerely cares about their well-being.

In their book *Wired to Care*, Dev Patnaik and Peter Mortensen expand on this approach and suggest that management should care about the needs of all of the stakeholders in the organization. "It's just human nature to be interested in people who are interested in you. If you want to create products and services that other people care about, you should put aside your problems and start caring about other people's lives."² The underlying theory of empathy-based management is that *connection*, not *correction*, is required for professional development of your employees and management of employee behavior. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

EMPATHY-BASED MANAGEMENT

The approach presented in this book is fundamentally different in both underlying assumptions and methodology from the traditional management practice of incentive programs. Traditionally, the focus of management has been on the company and, in particular, what is in the best interest of the organization. The underlying assumption of traditional management theory is that the purpose of employee motivation is to encourage and entice employees to work hard and maximize their productivity, which will benefit the company and have a positive impact on the organization's bottom line.

By contrast, the underlying assumption and starting point for empathy-based management is that the manager is working in the best interest of both the organization and the people employed by the organization. This means that the supervisor works hard to ensure that the

employees grow professionally, become successful in life, and reach their potential. Competent, capable, ethical, and fully engaged employees will strengthen the performance of any organization. Helping each employee mature and become successful through professional development is one of the best investments any organization can make.

With empathy-based management, not only does the manager influence employees, but the employees also influence management. As the manager-employee relationship becomes stronger through trust and shared experiences, so does loyalty and identification with the organization. This felt connection, on a personal level, is a source of strength and an important employee asset that creates a foundation for the professional growth of both employees and managers. As one experiences professional growth, it often results in a desire to further excel professionally. Finally, the entire organization benefits from the professional growth occurring within everyone involved in this relationship.

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

Keeping in mind the goal of empathy-based management is to create dedicated, ethical, competent, and enjoyable employees, this book will teach you the following four important concepts regarding empathy and its role in effectively managing employees.

1. Teach supervisors/managers a basic understanding of how the human brain functions and why empathy creates an environment in which employees can fully engage their brains in their work.
2. Explain how the ability to empathize with the emotional states and experiences of your employee is actually the driving force behind your employee desiring to develop a personal relationship with you. And that personal relationship is the foundation for developing a psychological bond with each employee, which becomes a source of emotional security and strength for each of your workers.
3. Teach you how to become a more empathetic manager and how to engage each employee on a personal level in order to create an emotionally secure environment where everyone can put their cognitive and emotional energy into their work rather than taxing their mental energy worrying about a variety of issues.
4. Explain how a personal relationship with another human being, especially one supervisor, who is respected, creates a bond through which you can instill hope and which ultimately provides sustainable motivation. This book also explains why rules and temporary inducements fail to create sustainable motivation.

The immediate goal of empathy-based management is to create an emotionally safe and connected work environment. As a manager, you will learn how to calm down each employee's emotional state—including anger, fear, shame, and guilt—whenever the limbic region of the brain is triggered. This calming process will allow the employee to use the cognitive portion of her brain for thinking, problem solving, and decision making.

Also, for long-term cognitive growth and development, the human brain needs security and connection, not temporary inducements. Thus, employees grow professionally and are motivated to work hard for managers with whom they have developed a personal

relationship. For each of your employees, an emotional connection to you, their supervisor, creates the psychological stability required for personal growth. As a manager, at first the prospect of building these connections might seem like a scary or even overwhelming skill to master. But over time, your ability to empathize effectively will become easier until it finally becomes intuitive. Much like mastering the skill of public speaking or learning to play the piano, your ability to read each person's emotional state and respond appropriately to your employee's concerns will soon become instinctual with practice. However, because every person and situation is unique, the ability to empathize and respond appropriately will always require you to concentrate and use a significant amount of emotional energy. In time your ability to empathize with each employee will feel natural and good and will benefit the personal growth of everyone involved in the experience.

ROAD MAP TO THIS BOOK

Each chapter in this book will address a specific issue in order to help you better understand empathy-based management and thus become a more empathetic manager.

Chapter 1 defines the term *empathy* and explains its importance in human relationships. It will look at the behavior of the human brain and demonstrate why empathetic relationships are critical for personal growth and the ability to reach one's potential. The final topic covered in **chapter 1** is explaining empathy-based management.

Chapter 2 lays out the goals of empathy-based management: to create an emotional secure work environment, to give each employee hope, and to help each employee grow personally and professionally. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to explore how empathy and personal connectedness create sustainable motivation when other methods fail.

In **chapter 3** you will learn how to empathize when your employee is experiencing a crisis. You will learn about the concept of intersubjectivity, a fancy word for emotional experiences shared between two or more people. Through intersubjectivity you can join your employees in their experiences, both good and bad, with a sense of connectedness on an emotional level.

Chapter 4 lays out the tools you will need to empathize with your employees on a daily basis. The first half of the chapter is a guide to practices that are empathetic. The second half presents pitfalls to avoid. These pitfalls are included as guides to help you better understand the parameters of empathetic behavior.

Chapter 5 puts all of the different tools of empathy-based management into practice. This includes what to do, why it works, and how each technique calms down the limbic region, the emotional center of the human brain, and creates a sense of connection, hope, and feeling valued.

The book concludes with a summary of the highlights and key issues for practicing management based on empathy in any organization. Following the conclusion are appendices and worksheets that are included to help you better understand the nature of empathy-based management and get you started in becoming more empathetic in your management practices.

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Management literature often treats empathy as a fixed personality trait. This assumption is incorrect. Much like learning how to drive a car, empathetic behavior is a skill that can be mastered with practice by virtually anyone.

EMPATHY: THE FOUNDATION FOR A NEW APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT

When we are understood, we feel affirmed and validated.

—STEPHEN COVEY

It is not our position, but our disposition, that makes us happy.

—ANONYMOUS

Reflecting on both my childhood and my career, I can recall certain times when I have been very motivated to work hard. I noticed that during each period of peak motivation, I was under the tutelage of an authority figure I respected and admired. I have come to understand that the reason I felt a personal connection to specific authority figures—and not the numerous other potential authority figures—was because of each person’s ability to empathize with my concerns.

You likely find that people who share your thoughts, feelings, and ideas are interesting. And you likely don’t feel any connection with people who appear to have no interest in you. As with first impressions when dating, most of us can tell through the interactions following our first meeting with a new boss whether the relationship is going to be successful or disastrous. This sense is based on determining your boss’s level of empathy—if she has the ability to walk in your shoes or if she doesn’t seem to “get” you.

DEFINING EMPATHY

The dictionary defines *empathy* as “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.”³ This is the idea of walking in another person’s shoes.

Although this explanation is clear, I prefer humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers’s working definition of empathy: “Real communication occurs ... when we listen with understanding. What does this mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about.”⁴ I prefer Rogers’s definition because real empathy becomes possible not by identifying with another person, but when we begin to have an understanding of what the person is experiencing and of the underlying problem, or why the person behaves in a certain way. This understanding is the core of empathy, and it alone has the power to bring two people together.

Let’s break down this understanding of empathy further. There are four steps to behaving with empathy. First, assume nothing. A good starting point is the honest recognition that you don’t know the situation or the person’s experience during the situation.

Second, listen with understanding. Give the other person your undivided attention; actively listen, and don’t interject your own opinion into the matter. The key to listening with

understanding is asking good questions. These questions include the following:

- “What just happened?”
- “Why did it occur?”
- “What was the chronological order?” i.e. What happened first, then what, etc.?
- “How is your employee interpreting the behavior of other people?”

These questions are aimed at providing meaning and clarifying your understanding of the other person’s emotional experiences and what meanings the other person assigns to the event. You are trying to comprehend factually what happened, and also your employee’s perception of the incident.

Third, refine your comprehension of what the other person is saying and experiencing. This may include asking additional questions for clarification, questions such as: So, may I summarize? Can I share with you what I believe you are saying, and please correct me if I have misinterpreted what you have just said. As you summarize, your employee will correct you by explaining the points that you do not fully comprehend. Often, step three is where actual understanding on your behalf occurs. When this understanding is realized, your employee can now experience your empathy with his or her predicament (perception of the event).

Fourth, respond in a way that honors the unique experience of the other person. (The goal of authentic empathy is always to help, never to harm a person experiencing a difficult situation.) By honoring, you give respect or show courteous regard that is appropriate for the situation. This appropriate response may include both words and actions. This fourth step is the key to being perceived as empathetic. Thus, it is important to remember that even though a person may possess great understanding of the experiences of another person, if the response does not honor the experience of the other person, the opportunity to display empathy will be lost.

Leadership coach Tanveer Naseer expands on Rogers’s definition: “What empathy really means is being able to understand the needs of others. It means that you’re aware of the feelings and how it impacts their perception. It doesn’t mean you have to agree with how they see things; rather, being empathetic means that you’re willing and able to appreciate what the other person is going through.”⁵ Thus, to empathize is to display understanding of another person’s perspective, while withholding any and all judgment.

For example, if you have an employee who blames another employee for his work-related problems, to empathize means that you understand that from your employee’s perception the other person is the cause of the problem. This does not mean that you agree with the employee.

Respected psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli and coauthor Katherine Ketcham help to further explain the importance of empathy:

By increasing our awareness of other people’s thoughts and feelings, empathy shows us how to live life fully and wholeheartedly. Empathy is primarily interested in that process of becoming, enlarging, and expanding, for in truth that’s what empathy is—an expansion of your life into the lives of others, the act of putting your ear to another person’s soul and listening intently to its urgent whisperings. Who are you? What do you feel? What do you think? What means the most to you? These are the questions empathy seeks to explore. Playful and curious, always interested in the moment-

Ciaramicoli and Ketcham consider empathy the expansion of your life into the lives of other people for the sake of understanding, alleviating loneliness, and instilling hope. Equally important, empathy creates camaraderie, companionship, and fellowship. It results in a perception of connection, importance, and an enjoyment of life.

ONE of the best examples of empathy comes from the book of Job in both the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian Bible. Job was a very wealthy man who, through three simultaneous tragedies, lost everything, including his family and his material wealth. We read:

“When Job’s three friends ... heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was.”⁷

This is a wonderful example of how to empathize. Job’s three friends did not try to cheer him up; rather, they behaved in a way that honored his emotional state. Job was suffering deeply, so his friends joined him in his pain and suffering. This is what it means to empathize. The manager does not deny the employee’s feelings; rather, the manager joins the employee in his emotional state.

EMPATHY VS. SYMPATHY

Often, people confuse empathy with sympathy. The dictionary defines *sympathy* as the “faculty or power of sharing the feelings of another, especially in sorrow or trouble; fellow feeling; compassion, or commiseration.”⁸ Embedded in this definition of sympathy is “commiseration,” which has an element of feeling bad or sorry for the person.

The confusion between sympathy and empathy is unfortunate. The intention of sympathy is to commiserate with the person, in order to try and comfort. By contrast, the goal of empathy is to understand. To empathize is to not only understand the other person’s emotional state or predicament from his or her perspective, but also to comprehend the underlying meaning and causes of one’s feelings and behavior. This misunderstanding of the difference between sympathy and empathy is a serious problem because too often when we feel sorry for a person, we feel better, but the other person most likely will not feel better because no one with dignity wants other people to feel sorry for them. Even worse, an employee who is skilled in manipulation can use a manager’s sympathy to his own advantage, including getting out of work or getting the manager to do things for him. By contrast, with empathy, you the manager are able to alleviate feelings of isolation, and with understanding, real problem solving can occur.

~~UNFORTUNATELY~~, all too often people have dismissed the importance of empathy in the business world because they believe empathy is all about emotions rather than the use of logic. I have been told that empathy is too touchy-feely to be of any use in the real world. This lack of understanding is tragic for two reasons. First, the core of empathy is a logical understanding of what the other person is thinking and feeling. Second, if you are unwilling to learn how to empathize, you will be at a serious disadvantage competing against individuals who have mastered the skill of empathizing and are able to understand the employee's and customer's thoughts, feelings, desires, and perspectives. This ability to accurately understand the reasons behind another person's behavior is a very crucial skill to master in order to be successful in the business world.

WE ALL HAVE THE ABILITY TO EMPATHIZE

Occasionally, I have a student tell me that the idea of being able to empathize with another person's perspective sounds like a wonderful ability, but unfortunately, the student does not feel like she is very good at empathy. I respond with the fact that unless a person is a psychopath, each one of us has the innate ability to empathize.

Ciaramicoli and Ketcham explain that the ability to observe and interpret the nonverbal behavior of other people is already hardwired into our brains as an innate characteristic of human beings:

We are constantly, if subconsciously, reading other people's emotions and thoughts by watching their facial expressions for subtle changes, noting the way they purse their lips, raise their eyebrows, or grit their teeth, observing the way their muscles shift to express tension, fear, or disgust, registering how they stand relaxed, hands in pockets, or nervously shift from one foot to the other. Through careful observation of other people's non-verbal behavior, we can infer, often with surprising accuracy, what they are thinking and feeling.⁹

As Ciaramicoli and Ketcham explain, for our own survival we have the ability to interpret the behavior of other people. However, for every human behavior and display of emotion there are an infinite number of possible causes for a person's mood and disposition. Thus, even though observational empathy is a trait instinctually present within our nature, without practice, a person is unlikely to move beyond observing and interpreting behavior. In contrast, the goal of empathy-based management is not only to understand a person's behavior, but also to comprehend their perspective and the causes of the behavior.

NEUROSCIENCE SUPPORT

Now that you have a better understanding of what empathy is, it is important to consider what is happening inside the brain of each of your employees and how the human brain responds to your different behaviors. Physiological reasons determine why your employees respond in a particular way to your behavior. Fortunately, because of improvements

medical imaging over the past two decades, including functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology, neuroscientists have made great advancements in both mapping and understanding the different portions of the human brain. Recent studies in neuroscience have begun to underscore the importance of empathy to the well-being and personal growth for each one of us. Also, neuroscientists, including Robert Sapolsky and Daniel Siegel, emphasize the importance of empathy in human interactions for the growth and development of the human brain.

As managers of employees, we need to update our theories to include empathy in regard to both employee behavior and how a manager motivates employees. Managers need to draw from this developing field of neuroscience and the importance of empathetic behavior when attempting to improve our ability to motivate employees.

I will divide this discussion of the workings of our brain into two parts, and summarize the major points pertinent to empathy at the end of this discussion. Part one focuses on the makeup of the human brain and how different regions of the brain respond to human relationships. You will see why perceived negative or strained relationships impair brain functioning, and by contrast, how empathy builds connections between human brains and is required for mental stability and growth. In part two, we will examine the parts of the human brain responsible for making empathy possible.

PART 1: STRUCTURE OF THE HUMAN BRAIN AND HOW RELATIONSHIPS MOTIVATE THE HUMAN MIND

Perhaps the simplest illustration of the human brain is Daniel Siegel's human hand model. Hold out your hand, tuck in your thumb, and wrap your four fingers over your thumb. Your hand becomes a simple but very useful illustration of the human brain.

The wrist and palm of your hand represent the brain stem. The brain stem, also known as the "reptilian brain," controls the basic functions of the human body, including breathing, digestion, and regulating heartbeat. This is the part of the brain we share with reptiles. One could think of a reptile as a tube, with or without legs, and with teeth on one end. What do reptiles do? They eat, breathe, reproduce, and when in danger, they either fight or run away and hide. Beyond these basic instincts, not much thinking takes place. The entire function of the reptilian brain is self-preservation of its own existence.

The thumb tucked under your fingers represents the limbic region, also known as the "emotional center" of one's brain. This region includes the amygdala, the hypothalamus, cingulate gyrus, and hippocampi, one on each side, near your ears. At the core of the limbic region are the amygdala—two almond-shaped structures—that are an amazing part of the brain. Although other structures in the brain contribute to the formation of emotion, including the prefrontal neocortex, insula, and the cerebellum, the amygdala are the emotional alarm center of our brain and which signal different glands throughout our body to release hormones in response to our emotional state.

These functions of the amygdala are critical to human relationships. First, the amygdala are a social processing center. The amygdala assess every interaction we have with other people and animals, continuously monitoring every encounter for safety and danger. Emotional values are assigned to the behavior of other people during every social interaction, including safe, dangerous, cold, warm, exciting, boring, pleasurable, painful, etc. The brain stores these emotional interpretations for future interactions with each individual. If a person has been assigned a negative feeling, such as dangerous, boring, strange, or creepy, the human brain will attempt to avoid interactions with the individual in the future. If the person is assigned a positive feeling, such as fun, interesting, safe, or exciting, the brain will seek to build on the relationship through future interactions.

Second, along with creating a wide variety of emotional states, the amygdala are also the brain's fight-or-flight alarm center. If at any time we consider another person's behavior unsafe, or if we see a person who in the past has been assessed to be unsafe, the amygdala will instantly cause the release of stress hormones that will immediately shift our entire body into fight-or-flight mode.

Within the limbic region, the hippocampus is attached to the amygdala. The hippocampus is responsible for determining what information is to be stored in the brain's long-term memory. The problem for the brain is that every day our five senses encounter millions of pieces of information to process. So, how does the hippocampus determine which pieces of information need to be stored into long-term memory? The hippocampus only stores events that have an emotional response associated with the encounter. The human brain is structured such that if the amygdala attach a strong emotional value to an event, then the

hippocampus deems the event with the emotional attachment important enough to be stored in long-term memory. The other millions of pieces of information without any emotional importance are not transferred from working memory into long-term memory. For example, what do you remember from last year at this time? Most likely, you will not remember the exact details or itinerary of an average day. But if I ask you what you were doing on September 11, 2001, you most likely can remember the events of that day in great detail.

Two notes are worth mentioning regarding the hippocampus. First, it is one of the structures in the human brain most susceptible to chronic stress. Over time, exposure to high levels of chronic stress damages the hippocampus, and its ability to transfer important information into long-term memory becomes impaired. Thus, a highly stressed, poorly functioning hippocampus results in a reduction of information saved into a person's working memory. For example, if you recall a shared experience with a friend or coworker who has been under high stress for long periods of time, it is quite possible that she will have no recollection of the experience. Similarly, last-minute cramming for an exam stresses the hippocampus, and little pertinent information is committed to long-term memory. Plus, an exhausted brain has a horrible time trying to retrieve any information from memory.

Each employee needs a well-functioning hippocampus to do his or her job competently and effectively. For example, remembering a customer's name, troubleshooting unique problems, and remembering important details about each employee and important customers, including names of family members and birthdays, are all critical for success in a variety of jobs.

Second, the hippocampus is not mature until a child is around two-and-one-half years of age. If you think back to your childhood, your earliest memories likely start at around age two-and-one-half to three years of age. Without a mature, functioning hippocampus, we are unable to form explicit, long-term memories.

The third area of the brain, which is primarily responsible for complex cognitive processes, is the outside, called the cerebrum. These complex tasks include interacting and negotiating with other people, caring for our families, diagnosing and curing numerous diseases, harnessing nature to create a climate-controlled environment in which to live, diagnosing and solving a plethora of challenging problems in every field of study, and creating beautiful musical symphonies and aesthetically pleasing works of art. Like the canopy of a mushroom covering the stem, the cerebrum covers both the brain stem and limbic region. To understand the magnitude of the cerebrum, by one estimate, the brain stem contains around fifteen to twenty million nerve cells, and the limbic region contains around one hundred million nerve cells. Contrast this to the cerebrum, which is made up of one hundred billion nerve cells. The gray matter covering the brain is called the cerebral neocortex and is the area where our cognitive functions take place.

Specifically, the area in the front of our brain, called the prefrontal neocortex, is where reasoning and judgment take place. The region known as the dorsolateral prefrontal neocortex is where our actual mental processing takes place. Information from every area of our brain is sent to the dorsolateral prefrontal neocortex. After the dorsolateral prefrontal neocortex analyzes the information and makes a decision, the decision is relayed to the brain stem for the body to carry out, including the coordination of muscle movement in response to the decision.

One important fact managers should be aware of is that the prefrontal neocortex

responsible for sound judgment and decision making, does not mature until adulthood. Also, it matures faster in women than in men. This maturation of the prefrontal neocortex is the reason that car insurance rates are lower for female drivers than for males until they reach age twenty-five. Because of the immature prefrontal neocortex, good-natured, well-meaning young people will make errors in judgment. This lack of judgment will occur in every organization, and often, it will be more of a brain maturation issue than an issue of malicious intent. When this poor judgment occurs, a manager responding with empathy can mean the difference between an employee feeling humiliation and a teachable moment when personal growth and development can occur.

Perhaps surprisingly to some people, the limbic region controls the behavior of the human brain. As the human brain grows and matures, the limbic region and cortex become increasingly intertwined. As these two regions merge, human reasoning and feelings increasingly influence each other. But whenever the brain is stressed or a person feels “under pressure,” emotions will supersede logic.

This role of the limbic region controlling the functions of our brain is described in detail by neurologist and neurobiologist Andrew Curran (2008):

Emotions and our emotional brains underpin everything we learn, and the more you have connected with another human being emotionally the more they can learn from you¹⁰ ... What is also now known is that this wiring together of nerve cells is predominantly under the control of your emotional system—the more emotion in a situation the more likely it is you will learn from it. So here is the second piece of understanding about brain functioning—the wiring together of nerve cells is predominantly under the control of your emotional system. This means that your emotional self is centrally involved in creating who you are.¹¹

Now, the idea that emotions control our decision-making process may seem counterintuitive. After all, I firmly believe that I use logic, not emotions, whenever I make a decision. But the work of neurologist Antonio Damasio contradicts this notion. In his book *Descartes' Error*, Damasio demonstrates that not only do emotions play a central role in our decision making but our limbic region regulates our decision-making processes. People with a damaged limbic region find themselves paralyzed by indecision. The reason is our limbic region uses the intensity of our emotions to calibrate our preferences. Without clearly established preferences, decision making becomes impossible.

More specifically, our amygdala is our alarm center for our brain. The amygdala responds much faster to threats than the neocortex of our brain. The amygdala responds with fight or flight in milliseconds, while the reaction time of the neocortex of our brain can be timed in seconds. Once the amygdala reacts, they immediately signal the hypothalamus, which controls our adrenal glands to release cortisol and epinephrine (adrenaline). The release of these stress hormones shuts down the cerebrum (neocortex) of our brain, shuts down our immune system, and elevates our heartbeat and our blood pressure. All thinking stops; we are ready to fight or run. Unfortunately, in many offices, this is a daily occurrence as the manager harshly reprimands employees. Each employee responds with anger and raised blood pressure and spends the rest of the day in fight-or-flight mode toward the manager with no useful cognitive thinking taking place for the rest of the day. This is also why people who are under chronic stress are often physically sick. Raised levels of stress hormones over prolonged periods of time from chronic stress result in a compromised immune system.

This response in the limbic region is also the reason corporate incentive plans for employees often do not work as intended. The idea behind incentive plans is that if you place a reward in front of any employee, the person will work harder in order to earn the reward. Unfortunately, as Daniel Pink explains, a reward system has unintended effects on our brain.

Like all extrinsic motivators, goals narrow our focus. That's one reason they can be effective; they concentrate the mind. But as we've seen, a narrowed focus exacts a cost. For complex or conceptual tasks, offering a reward can blinker the wide-ranging thinking necessary to come up with an innovative solution. Likewise, when an extrinsic goal is paramount—particularly a short-term, measurable one whose achievement delivers a big payoff—its presence can restrict our view of the broader dimensions of our behavior.¹²

Our amygdala sense the additional tension or stress caused by the potential reward, and our adrenal gland releases cortisol and epinephrine as our brain and body respond to the challenge at hand. As planned by the manager, our cerebrum focuses on the source of the new tension, namely the potential reward, and guides our brain stem to do the required work, including muscle movements in order to achieve the reward. This is exactly the response that the manager wants from the employee. For jobs that require repetitive physical motion and no critical thinking, such as a cashier at a supermarket or a worker on an assembly line, reward systems work great for motivating employees.

The unintended problem is that when the stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine are released in our brain, our cerebrum focuses all of our cognitive energy on the source of the stress, namely achieving the reward, and this narrows the focus of overall thinking taking place in the brain. Therefore the unintended problem is that with a narrowed focus, by design of our cerebrum, we sacrifice our ability to think creatively and problem solve. One exception to this loss of creativity is that when a worker's cerebrum focuses solely on achieving a reward, she may use her cognitive abilities to achieve the reward through a creative method, including but not limited to, cheating in order to obtain the desired outcome.

Therefore any approach based on reward and punishment is no longer well suited for corporate America because over the past three decades most assembly-type jobs have been moved to developing countries. The majority of jobs that remain in the United States require problem-solving skills. For any job in your organization that requires either problem-solving skills or creativity, motivational programs based on rewards will create unintentional problems.

Ultimately, the reason that inducement-based approaches to employee motivation do not work well is because they are designed to control the behavior of people, keeping them subordinate to a manager's agenda. Reward systems are designed for compliance. They achieve compliance, but at an unintended cost; they create conformity and lower creativity.

For example, Teresa Amabile, a Harvard Business School Professor, conducted a study where a group of artists were each asked "to randomly select ten commissioned works and ten noncommissioned works" to be judged. The "commissioned works were rated as significantly less creative than the noncommissioned works, yet they were not rated as different in technical quality."¹³ The artists' comments suggested that commissioned works were more stressful to paint because of higher internalized expectations from being paid. The stress felt by the artists' amygdalas resulted in less creative works of art.

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