



EMPATHY

Is the Superpower of Coaching

BY JACKIE ACHO

Take a moment and think about your best coach.
What was she like? What did he do that was special?

Was it a middle school teacher, a high school track coach, or someone in your career? Maybe you remember a quotable line or two from the coach's advice, but chances are, most of that has faded away. What you can easily recall is how capable, talented, even joyful you felt with that person. Maybe you were not a natural and had to work hard. The coach cleared away the clutter of your doubts and distractions, helped you prioritize your time and attention, and taught you the skills you needed, as you needed them. Working with the coach was like stepping on the moving walkway at the airport. You did the walking, but it felt more like flying, and you arrived at your destination in record time.

Now, think about a time when you were a great coach yourself. Think about people who were grateful for your help. What did you do? How did they respond? How did you feel about those people? If it's been a while, the specifics are probably fuzzy. Most likely, you were invested not just in teaching them skills but helping them grow. You shared the knowledge they wanted to learn, but you came to know them as people. You saw the light inside them, perhaps before they realized it themselves. The ones you most fondly remember may not have been naturally gifted at first, but their potential was catalyzed by the work you did together. Something

happened in the space between you that made conversations more open, sharing unfettered, and learning effortless.

Great coaching is not easy, because it is always asking people to change. Sometimes people are not ready to change. Even when they are, change is difficult. It requires a rewiring of our brains that can be time-consuming and even painful. Change requires loss, even when it's good. It can trigger fear about what the future will hold, regret about how we spent our time up until now, or anger. In a great coaching relationship, empathy is the lifeblood that helps us move through all of that.

EMPATHY IS OUR SUPERPOWER

What is empathy? Empathy is the ability to feel and understand the inner emotional experience of another and have an appropriate emotional response. It was translated from the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning "infeeling" or "feeling into," coined in philosopher Robert Vischer's PhD thesis in 1873. Empathy is a word we use to represent a complex soup of cognitive, emotional, and physical responses that are a unique part of the human experience. Empathy is not fusion. If someone is down in the dumps and you climb down into the hole and stay there, you will not be much good to that person.



Empathy is not manipulation either—merely getting someone to do what you want him to do.

Empathy is generally differentiated into two major components:

- Cognitive empathy is a thinking activity. Some people call it imaginative empathy. It occurs in conscious awareness. It is the ability to identify and understand another's feelings. Sometimes we call this kind of empathy "perspective taking." Cognitive empathy allows me to know what you are feeling, but it doesn't mean that I have to share that feeling.
- Affective empathy is a feeling activity. It is also called emotional empathy or primitive empathy. It is unconscious and happens automatically, outside of our awareness. It is the ability to share another's emotions. Affective empathy allows me to feel what you are feeling. We feel it in our bodies before we even recognize it as an emotion.

In the best coaching relationships, the future is co-created between people. The coach brings particular expertise or a process of discovery. The person being coached brings his skills, his emotions, his stories about the past, and his ideas about the future. That future takes shape in the conversation. We often talk about "meeting someone where she's at." What that really means is empathizing, both ways.

Great coaches work from the head (cognitive empathy) and the heart/body (affective empathy), imagining the perspective of another from what she says, but also taking in the state of

her being as communicated from the body, without words. Great students empathize too. Learning something new is an imaginative activity, starting with understanding what the other person is offering (cognitive empathy). Open students also absorb, for good and bad, the emotional content of the lesson (affective empathy). They know, regardless of the words (such as through tone, facial expressions, the way someone holds his body), whether the interaction inspires joy or fear. They feel whether they are being seen clearly or manipulated.

Great coaching relationships grow the capacity for full, mature empathy in both people. It is a safe space to be open, vulnerable, and empathic. With that current of essential humanity flowing between people, great coaching relationships feel good and deliver the biggest superpower of all: empathy.

MAKING SPACE FOR EMPATHY

Most of us do not have a perfect capacity for empathy all the time. Distractions get in the way of our imagination. Emotions, even unconscious ones, can engross our bodies whether we want them to or not. How do we grow our capacity for empathy? You cannot so much train empathy into someone as make space for him to practice. Just as you cannot think your way into six-pack abs, developing empathy takes exercise.

We develop our foundation for empathy early. We learn from



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our first coaches, our parents. Affective empathy develops first and lays the foundation for cognitive empathy. It starts in our bodies, the day we are born or even in utero. It develops before we have words, back when we communicated with bodily feeling states. Remember that? You probably don't have cognitive memories, but according to child development experts, people do have “feeling memories” of the time before words. Everyone who was ever an infant has experience with bodily empathy. This means you.

Despite the fact that affective empathy is a life-giving force, it is often the forgotten stepsister of what we think about when we use the word “empathy”—which is the cognitive type. Some scientific fields omit affective empathy altogether from working definitions of empathy. The unconscious nature of emotions means they are a challenge to quantify with basic scientific tools, requiring special creativity and cross-disciplinary study.

Acknowledging affective empathy can also be inconvenient. It can feel like a square peg in the round hole of a society that favors efficiency and devalues caring work—the type of work that develops this kind of empathy. Thanks to better neuroscientific imaging techniques and evolutionary biology's growing interest in the field, however, affective empathy is making a comeback.

Here is something most people usually don't discuss when it comes to cognitive empathy: It is selfish first. One must know

himself before he can relate to others. A concept of selfhood is a prerequisite to mature empathy. We take for granted our perspective as individuals in a community, but sense of self wasn't always possible, collectively or individually. Over time, the awakening of a sense of self brought our species out of the collective prehistoric fog of our hunter-gatherer forebearers. Individuality continued to grow. Today, sense of self is especially evident in countries such as the United States, which exalts it.

On an individual level, it isn't until 18 to 24 months of age that a child begins to develop a sense of self. Have you ever seen a toddler discover and love on herself in a mirror? What you witnessed was not just adorable; it was the signal of important and relatively unique brain development called mentalization. When a child reaches mentalization, she is able to recognize another person's mind as different from her own, consciously understanding that thoughts and feelings underlie behavior. It is at this point that children have the capacity to develop cognitive empathy, the ability to imagine another perspective. Empathy becomes represented in thoughts.

Once the capacity for cognitive empathy emerges, empathy development becomes conscious and more deliberate, utilizing a new set of tools. While empathy continues to be shaped by its affective foundation, new forces based in language and ideas begin to make their mark. Education is one such tool. The use of rewards and punishment, such

as praise or shame, is another. All of these cognitive tools are at their best when the cognitive continues to work with the affective. When the cognitive (imagining abstractly how another person feels) becomes disconnected from the affective (actually feeling tangibly in our bodies the way another person feels), problems ensue.

Another way of understanding the connection between affective and cognitive empathy is through the concept of “conscience.” What people generally refer to as “conscience” can be a mediator between our affective state (how we feel), our cognition (how we think about how we feel), and our behavior (what we do about it). When we think or do something that contradicts our affective empathy template, we may feel pain in the form of cognitive dissonance (a feeling that does not follow the story we tell ourselves). This dissonance signals us to reassess our thoughts and behaviors with the chance of making things “right.” In this sense, “right” means a realignment of our affective and cognitive states. “Right” can also mean “moral.” When this mediator is no longer working properly, our thoughts and actions fail to be properly informed. Sometimes coaching requires bridging that gap between cognitive and affective empathy, so that we feel resonance, inside and out.

SECOND CHANCES TO LEARN EMPATHY

If someone was not gifted by their parents with healthy empathy, the good news is that neuroplasticity allows us to continue developing our capacity for empathy until we die. How? Remember that empathy is selfish first. You cannot give what you do not have. Taking care of your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs outside of your relationships is not narcissistic. It is necessary. It’s easy to get burned out as a coach if you never attend to yourself. Eat well, exercise, do yoga, meditate, take walks—whatever your body and spirit need to feel fed. Then, care for others: friends, spouses, aging parents, and especially children. Allocate time in a way that allows for both. Work your work around those priorities. It is simple, but it’s not easy because time is often short. It is worth it though, because it makes space for you to develop your capacity for empathy.

After early childhood, becoming a parent brings the second most explosive development of our capacity for empathy. It only makes sense. The parent-child dance takes two. The music is empathy. Sure enough, neuroscientists are now finding that hands-on parenting increases empathy in the brain. What a mix-up it is, then, that the United States ranks last in the developed world for parental leave. Last. We are depriving both parents and children of their superpower of empathy. The results can be painful.

DO YOU KNOW A CORPORATE PSYCHOPATH?

If you are empathic by nature, taking care of yourself includes being mindful of the time you spend with people who


struggle to empathize. Sometimes, they are clients who have been referred to a coach to improve their “people skills.” Neuroscience professor Simon Baron-Cohen has shown a correlation between evil behavior and absence of empathy, including that of borderlines, narcissists, and psychopaths.

Studies show that corporate psychopaths create toxic work environments that lead to conflict, low worker morale, and poor performance. Corporate psychopaths promote conflict by pitting people against each other and bullying subordinates. They neglect their managerial and leadership responsibilities, take credit for the work and ideas of others, and blame others for their own mistakes. Sound familiar? In the news, if not personally?

Even if you do not see extreme empathy deficits, the 70% of people disengaged at work, as Gallup’s State of the American Workplace: 2010–2012 report shows, is a glaring symptom of a general lack of connectivity and empathy. People with empathy deficits are a product of their environment. They may have started out empathic but were encouraged to lean out of their empathy by a system that rewarded “survival of the fittest” and marginalized the empathy they learned as children. The lack of empathy can be situational, triggered by circumstances. Most of us feel zero situational empathy from time to time—no empathy, no remorse. Have you ever done something you regretted later? Have you ever overlooked someone for the sake of efficiency? Most of us have.

IT IS JUST A MATTER OF TIME

There is a good chance that in the future, we will have a new way to work. Different aspects of our networked economy are likely to impact how we allocate time in the future. As more people lean into their superpower of empathy, they will migrate away from jobs that make no space for life outside of work. People will choose empathy. It is only human. Coaches can help people recover their humanity and steward empathy in their organizations.

Empathy is part of the solution too. Empathy collapses time. Think back to your most beautiful coaching relationships, both when you were the coach and when you were coached. In the best times, did it not feel as though you could do anything? Time was not a concern. Maybe time even stood still. That time, our most precious and limited resource, is one of the biggest gifts of a great coach. Time well spent, so you have few regrets. Time well-planned, so you look to the future with calm hope. Time in which empathy flows, so you have the courage to know yourself, change, and grow. 

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