

# The Worklife Journey: Journal

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## The Global Empathy Deficit: Lessons for Leadership

"...We've got a budget deficit that's important, we've got a trade deficit that's critical, but what I worry about most is our empathy deficit."

- Interview in O Magazine with Barack Obama

Perhaps this is not only a U.S. national concern but also a global crisis: it seems that everywhere people are dividing into camps and fighting one another with no intention of sitting down to dialogue.

The fighting is not only among warring nations. It goes on in corporations, in small businesses, between entrepreneurs, in schools, in neighborhoods, and in families. There is a lack of talking, listening, and empathizing between people. This is especially true when others are different from us in some way.

There is an empathy deficit disorder hidden within all of us. We lose patience with others not like us or not of the same viewpoint. We stop listening. Consequently, we lose our ability to understand and find solutions. Most importantly, we lose access to the greatest secret – the tremendous power that lies within the synergy of human relationships.

We miss opportunities for dialoguing about what really matters. Dialoguing means listening and hearing what the other person is saying as well as speaking in a way that can be understood by the "other". This kind of communication requires that we speak and listen from the heart - it requires empathy. And like so many other things about heart, learning empathy begins with ourselves.

### Lessons in Empathy

Empathy has several ingredients.

When we receive information from another person, it impacts us more emotionally than when information is communicated through books or other more cognitive or academic means. These emotional reactions are processed in nanoseconds in the brain and matched to memories of similar situations that we have experienced. What we respond to is our own memories and our own emotional reactions that are similar to those being communicated to us. A new book by Malcolm Gladwell, "Blink", explores this realm of the immediate impression, its dangers and its underdeveloped possibilities.

Native American wisdom called for a member of the tribe to "walk a mile in the other brave's moccasins" before rendering judgment on a situation. The quality being described here is to not get lost in our own memories and emotions but to try and see the world from the "other" point of view. This requires a great deal of self awareness and self-management.

How can we build empathy? A really effective approach I've used from my theater rehearsal days is to role play the other person with an associate. The associate "acts" me and I portray the person I want to understand more deeply. This forces me to engage with the other person in a more emotional way. This method is often used in advanced sales techniques to understand the needs of the customer. Check out Robert Mcnamara's discussion on empathising with the enemy in the film *Fog of War* .

### The Other Side of Empathy

Sometimes our tendency is to jump in, doing something too soon. Often we don't take the time to really understand what the problem is before offering solutions. Responding too quickly can cause us to be perceived as dismissive, disregarding the emotional impact.

So, the next important lesson after listening with heart is to communicate or reflect back that you are hearing him or her on a deep and personal level. Some people have a preference for expressing themselves in logical, objective



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### The Little Things



On Wednesday, December 22, my house along with 300,000 others in the state of Ohio were plunged into total darkness as a result of a massive ice storm. The light, warmth and convenience supplied from a limitless electricity grid is easy to take for granted. As day one and its quaint candlelight, fireplaces and blankets gave way to day two and its freezing temperatures and lack of sleep, it was clear that without immediate restoration of service, we would have to take our family and visiting holiday guests to a hotel, drain the pipes and close up the house, its decorations and holiday plans. It suddenly occurred to me that our ancient, gas fired boiler system and radiators would work if only I could get the gas valve to open and supply fuel to the pilot light. After a few experiments, we found that a simple 9 volt battery attached to

terms rather than in feeling, subjective words. Others (you touchy-feely types) start with and expect others to connect with the emotional quality of the moment and to include feelings in the decision making process. Situationally, both of these qualities are valuable. However, they can both also be disastrous if used inappropriately. When utilized together in a tolerant and respectful way the decision making is more comprehensive and insightful. In personality assessments like the Myers-Briggs this is measured as "thinking vs. feeling" and in the Birkman as "empathy" and "esteem" scores. One style is not right or wrong or better than another, simply different. Learning to respect and access the power of the difference can make a real difference in the quality of our communications. Here are a few tips for practice:

1. Simply state back to the person some of what you've heard, without interpretation or distortion – "What I heard you say was..."
2. Use paraphrase to put it into your own words and then check for understanding – "Let me be sure I understand, you mean....."
3. Ask open-ended questions to get at a deeper appreciation of the situation - "How did you go about that?" or "In what ways could you have changed the approach?"

supply fuel and ignite the system! Although it required constant attention, teamwork and perseverance, we actually made it through 4 days of frigid weather while all of our neighbors were forced to abandon ship until power was restored. Who would imagine that the survival of an entire home and family system would depend on a 9 volt battery?

90% of civilization lives without these amenities and struggles with darkness, temperature and constant vigilance against poverty and starvation (see the great Earth at Night shot below). Devastating tragedies like the recent Tsunami in South Asia can make it seem that the problems of the world are too large to tackle, with too many people in need for my meager efforts to have any effect. Can you realistically solve world hunger? War? Poverty? Maybe. But you can certainly have an effect larger than your personal efforts. In the way that a little battery can heat an entire house, it is possible for any one of us to ignite a fire that will set larger solutions in motion. That is my pledge for 2005. Let's work together to find a way to make a difference through the little things along the way.

As a start, I suggest making a donation to The Red Cross in support of the relief effort in South Asia.

Have a Happy New Year.

### Being Empathetic When You Are Not (or think you're not)

Many people are fearful when it comes to handling emotions. We pride ourselves on our ability to stay in control and "handle" things well. Frequently, others would simply appreciate being acknowledged for what they are feeling without any expectation that things need to be handled or controlled. A convenient structure to practice is **FIJA** – **F**eelings, **I**nformation, **J**udgment & **A**ction. Practice using your objective side to recognize the **F**eelings involved and clearly state what you observe – "I can see that this has you really upset, what do you think you should do next?" or, "I am really happy about the results here!". You will be pleasantly surprised at the appreciation you'll receive in return. Then state as clearly as possible the **I**nformation - facts or data of the situation – "we missed the deadline on the project by 5 days, etc." **J**udgment is where we can render an opinion – "I think Bob has a difficult time dealing with that customer" and then offer a proposed **A**ction – "I want to review the paperwork and make a plan!"

### Welcome to the New World

In most old world business cultures, the conventional wisdom has been that there is no place for emotions and that emotions are inherently not trustworthy in decisions. But feelings are data as much as facts are. The problem is not that we use emotions in decision making, it is that we do not use our emotions well in decision making. This has come about not through a fault in empathy but from a lack of expertise in using the emotional aspect effectively. Because I hit my thumb with a hammer doesn't mean hammers are bad, it means I need more skill in using them. Obviously, the results can be disastrous if we are inept, but the payoff will be just as great if we develop skillfulness.

In the new world of work, this skill of Empathy is critical to our survival. Globalization, diverse backgrounds and beliefs, strategic alliances between competitors – the wide gamut of emerging business culture - demands a heightened sense of empathy and the ability to adapt and use differences effectively.

If we can model empathic communications and remain open to understanding others even when they are not like us, the new world of synergistic human relationships will open up for us. Get ready to read a whole new crop of books on this subject like Peter Senge's new work, *Presense* and Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* and *Tipping Point*.

### The "Best of" Worklife

Movie	Book	Website
The Hunt for Red October	The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell Read the article on him in <a href="#">Fast Company</a>	Business Balls

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