**Safety empathy training: Yes You can learn empathy**

Imagine in the 1970s or 1980s, at the height of U.S industry’s panicked and agitated reaction to all the new OSHA rules and 50,000+ annual inspections, if a safety manager had gone to the owner of his company and said, “I’d like to start a safety training program in empathy, what do you think?”

Timing, as they say, is everything. And boy, that safety manager’s timing was off. Or you could say he was decades ahead of his time. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, the only investment business owners made in safety was to keep OSHA out of their hair. The name of the game in safety was compliance. That’s all that was talked about at safety conferences. And safety training “films” back then were dominated by OSHA compliance titles.

Fast forward now to 2013. Grainger, the Chicago-based $9-billion distributor of industrial supplies, including a vast array of safety gear, announces a new ad campaign: “From supplies and solutions to service and empathy.”

To quote from the press release: “This unique ad campaign was motivated by a Grainger cornerstone – empathy. The new campaign conveys Grainger’s understanding of their customers’ complicated issues. Grainger has their customers’ back. The campaign highlights Grainger’s underlying empathy toward the many complications its customers experience.”

Can you entertain the idea of a national ad campaign centered around empathy in the days of disco and the “me” generation beginning to generate its wealth in the ‘70s and ‘80s?

Here’s another sign of changing times: Earlier this year a Listening Symposium was sponsored by the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute, a state-of-the-art facility based at the Missouri School of Journalism. As one attendee said, “I had no idea 35 people could spend 36 hours talking about listening!”

Among the takeaways from the symposium: our hyper-paced digital world creates lots of distractions that hamper effective listening. Effective listening requires a clear message from the speaker. Poor listening can lead to poor – and costly – decisions. W. Edwards Deming, the management guru, said, “No amount of money will rectify a poor decision once it gets into the hands of customers.”

**The ability to relate**

Listening exercises are part of many empathy training courses. Empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions or experiences of others. To truly empathize, to tune into another person, you must be an “active listener” – focused, alert and mindful not only of what is being said, but to non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. In part, this is how empathetic people “read” others.

It’s not a coincidence that national advertising campaigns place a value on empathy and symposiums highlight the value and importance of listening at the same moment in time when the business media is heralding the age of “organizational cultures.” And safety books, consultants, speakers and conferences advocate workplace “cultures of safety.” The positives of workplace cultures, and this is particularly apt to safety cultures, is the emphasis on collaboration, teamwork, communication and employee engagement. The objective is to over time is to construct and nurture work-related cultures that place a premium on values, purpose, trust, transparency, cooperation and relationships.

**Safety –related empathy**

Employees are asked to “actively care” for one another; to be one another’s “brother’s and sister’s keeper.” Empathy, that combination of fairness, patience, sensitivity, support, listening, questioning, straight-talk and encouragement, is really the foundation for good communication, teamwork, safety observation and feedback programs, and safety recognition and reward programs. If you have a culture of safety operating on all those cylinders, you’ll very likely find a workplace with low injury rates, few if any OSHA problems, fair “no blame” incident investigations, lively safety training sessions and committee meetings, and high levels of volunteerism, hazard reporting, near-miss reporting, safety suggestions, and safety awareness and safety self-management.

Safety experts such as the late Dr. Dan Petersen, Dr. Judy Erickson, Dr. E. Scott Geller, and Dr. Tom Krause all have conducted research showing a strong correlation between a robust culture of safety and a superior safety performance, both in terms of leading (hazard reporting and mitigation rates) and lagging (injury rates) metrics.

No wonder a popular question these days is: Can empathy be learned?

Opinions are divided. In one camp are the “naturalists” who believe empathy is a gift one is born with. Or it is a product of early childhood development and the good fortune of having empathetic parents as models. The bottom line here is, “You either have got it or you don’t.”

Another camp, filled with many educators and psychologists, believe that empathy is a learned behavior. That children in kindergarten on up through adolescence and high school can be taught to demonstrate empathy, along with business executives, middle managers, supervisors, and employees.

**Recruiting for empathy**

The number one job skill for the year 2020 is empathy, according to a recent article by a *Forbes* magazine columnist. He researched the fast-growing occupations according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics – a list that includes sports coaches, fitness trainers, massage therapists, registered nurses, physical therapists, school psychologists, music tutors, preschool teacher, speech-language pathologists, personal financial planners, chauffeurs and private detectives – and noted that every one of these jobs calls for empathy.

And if empathy is considered a job skill, well, skills can be taught and learned, right?

That’s the conclusion of the Center for Creative Leadership, a top-ranked, global provider of executive education founded in 1970 with more than 450 faculty members and staff.

Those who contend empathy can be learned through training and education concede that some people naturally exude empathy and have an advantage over their peers who have difficulty expressing empathy. If not by birth, through circumstances – personal traumas and painful losses experienced especially early in life – some people will become “empaths.” And certainly narcissists and sociopaths are known to fake empathy in order to manipulate others.

**Empathy training tips**

So how can organizations help their people improve their empathy skills?

● **Talk about empathy.** Let employees know that empathy matters. Explain the difference between empathy and sympathy, which is a less complex projection of feeling reserved more narrowly for suffering and sorrow. Empathy – taking time out to understand, care for and develop others – builds trust, respect and credibility in relationships, leading to more productive and quality collaborations.

It soon becomes apparent how empathy improves job performance and business performance.

● **Correct misconceptions about empathy.** Yes, one can be both empathetic and assertive. Being empathetic is not being a patsy or a soft-touch. Actively caring can mean jumping in and stopping a co-worker from taking an unnecessary risk; or observing a co-working handling a task unsafely and offer direct corrective feedback. One can hear out a co-worker express him or herself while hold a completely different view on the subject.

● **Teach listening skills.** Pay attention to those non-verbal cues – tone of voice, pace of speech, facial expressions, eye movements, gestures and body posture. As the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “What you are speaks so loudly, I can’t hear what you say.” Be present and focused, with antennae raised, to discern unvoiced feelings and attitudes. If you’re not sure you are “reading” a person right, or need confirmation, ask questions. Paraphrase, clarify, and/or summarize what you’ve heard to further your understanding. Withhold any judgments of your own. Be an active participant in the conversation by saying, for example, “That sounds like something I went through…”

● **Emphasize self-awareness.** To be empathetic is to be in touch with your own feelings as well as the feelings of others. Know when you are too upset, angry, stressed, frustrated or disappointed in another person to enter into a dialog. Know when to stop yourself, temper yourself. Come back later.

● **Emphasize self-management.** This is a particularly important safety skill. The plant safety director cannot be omnipresent; superior safety performance comes from employees taking responsibility and being accountable for managing their own safety. This calls for people to monitor their impulses; check for knee-jerk reactions; know when they are too fatigued, stressed, distracted, hurried, or over-exerting; and possess situational awareness to avoid heat stress, cold stress, chemical exposures, sloppy housekeeping, and erratic or dangerous driving by others. Empathetic people are good at managing themselves because they are “in tune” with themselves.

● **Teach relationship management.** This knowing when you’re about to hit the “I’m right, you’re wrong” outburst or confrontation button. Balanced relationships on or off the job require give and take, compromise, a bit of diplomacy. Ask an employee to describe a co-worker they admire, and one they don’t. Then say, “What if I asked your co-workers to describe you? What words would you hope they used? What words would they really use? How close would the words you hope they would use come to the words they actually used? What changes would you need to make so that the actual descriptions matched up closer to your desired descriptions? The bottom line here: Every time we interact with others they form an image of us, and that image goes a long way to determine how comfortable and cooperative they will be with us. This has significant safety implications. Effective communication, which is critical for safety, can be corrupted if co-workers don’t feel comfortable, confident, or possess a spirit of cooperation when working with others. Empathetic people are good communicators.

**● Practice, practice, practice.** In training sessions you can set up role-playing exercises to practice and reinforce good listening skills, as well as self-awareness, self-management, and managing relationship. Set up work scenarios to hone students’ conversational skills. Hold “group shares” where students open up, without any fear of judgment, and talk about times they have succeeded, and times they have failed, at self-awareness, self-management, and managing relationships.

**How do I know empathy skills are increasing?**

At some point in the training, the instructor or facilitator will want to know, “Is this working? Is it taking hold? How do I know if empathy skills are improving?”

You can administer an anonymous perception survey of workers asking questions about the organization’s climate of empathy. Remember that climate, like the weather, changes much more quickly than cultures, which are years in the making. You can use “sensing sessions,” which are informal focus groups of small numbers of workers, to get a quick reading on their feelings about empathy on the job.

If you encounter silence and a fear of speaking up, that tells you trust and openness, key components of empathy, are still lacking.

You can use “safety contacts,” one-on-one conversations with employees where the subject is empathy and you do most of the questioning and listening. And you can do the time-honored workplace walkaround, using your eyes and ears to gauge if a spirit of cooperation is present, as well as morale, camaraderie, energy levels, and how much people are going out of their way to help and care for one another.