

# Chapter 50

## Restore Empathy in Modern Business Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is based on the author's reflection using 27 years' experience in business education in Hong Kong and the United States and decades of research concerning empathy and character development. In this chapter, empathy is defined as a process to consider a particular perspective of another person, to feel as another person feels, and to take action for the needs of that other person. It is related to concern, perspective taking, and action through intersubjective discovery. It has developmental characteristics and includes shared experiences and insightful discoveries in the interpersonal process. She advocates these key four benefits of mature, informed, and mindful empathy: intellectual virtues, effective leadership development, ethical decision making, and social capital at firm level which ultimately enhances profitability and firm valuation. She also shares her years of practice of developing students' empathetic skills in service-learning projects and in her organization behavior course.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on the reflection from my 27 years of professional experience in higher education in Hong Kong and the United States and my research concerning character development of my students in business education (Lam, 2016). I have seen that the “love of money” often overpowers empathy; empathy is often coupled with low esteem in our current business education (Holt, 2012; Holt and Marques, 2012). When I presented the idea of empathy in many international management conferences during the past ten years (2006-2015), many audiences questioned the possibility of practicing empathy in a highly competitive market. Their doubt motivated me to devote considerably more thought about the role of empathy in our modern business education and the beseeching request to develop our students' empathy when students' empathy level has plummeted because of on-line education (Dolby, 2013; Natale and Libertella, 2016) and the increasing usage of social media technologies (Konrath and Hsing,

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2011). Which aspects of empathy need to be restored in our modern business education? How should business students be guided to use technology wisely so that they can realize the importance of the development of their capacities of empathy? How should business educators prepare students to lead and manage tomorrow's businesses when recent research has already affirmed the importance of empathy in leadership and the essence of empathy in transformation leadership (Day et al., 2014; Terrasi, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Vaill, 1996, 1989, 2007; Weinberger, 2009)? In this chapter, I will review the concepts and the limits of empathy, then I will define empathy followed by the description of aspects of empathy that are beneficial to modern business education. Later, I will share my practices in service-learning projects and in an organizational behavior course.

## **EMPATHY**

### **Concept of Empathy**

There are many varieties of the definition of empathy. Empathy is broadly defined as the ability to understand and experience what others feel (Batson, 2011; Decety & Lamm, 2006; Goleman, 2006; Hoffman, 2000; Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005). Empathy is our innate human capacity which needs to be cultivated for virtuous human beings. Human beings are given abilities to mimic other people's emotions; and consequently the feelings of shared emotions are more automatic than cognitive sympathy. Human beings have the potential to practice empathetic concerns, engagements, and expressions to people of various backgrounds in their intellectual critical inquiry journey and in their professional careers. Students can learn empathetic skills and empathetic-based behavior when they are facilitated to understand others and perceive the emotions of others (Holt, 2012). It is teachable and is essential for humans to have flourished in the past, in the present, and in the future (Goleman, 2006; Rifkin, 2010). It is an essential element for critical thinking, positive appreciative inquiry, and creative thinking in organizational studies (Cameron et al., 2003; Cooperider et al., 2001; Finn, 2009; Vaill, 2007). It leads to altruistic motivation and helping behavior (Batson et al., 1987).

In the mid nineteenth century, a German philosopher, Thodor Lipps, extended the concept of *Einfühlung* (i.e. empathy) from arts to interpersonal relationships. He proposed empathy as personal projection about other people's experiences. Salovey & Mayer (1990:194-195) defined it as "the ability to comprehend another's feelings and to re-experience them oneself." The ability may cause personal distress when empathy is not well-managed. Lamm et al. (2007:42) defined empathy with three domains: "(1) an affective response to another person, which some believe entails sharing that person's emotional state; (2) a cognitive capacity to take the perspective of another person; and (3) some monitoring mechanisms that keep track of the origins (self vs others) of the expected feelings." They also found that the cognitive and motivation process can moderate the response to the pain of others. Decety and Lamm (2006:1146) argued that empathy is "the ability to experience and understand what others feel without confusion between oneself and others." Empathy includes emotion sharing (i.e. affective development) and also executive control to regulate and modulate the experience (i.e. cognitive and monitoring development). An empathetic response is an affective and cognitive response to others with certain levels of monitoring that is determined by personal choices.

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