

Community EQ: Empathy as a KPI in Post-COVID19 Business Culture

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Abstract

This white paper proposes that community empathy—in other words, actively practicing collective empathy—be a core element of the future of work in all business organizations, and that it be embraced actively as a key performance indicator using socio-technological solutions. First of all, we present the current state of work as it intersects with (post)COVID19 society, drawing attention to the urgency and recognized need for nurturing “soft” human capabilities like empathy among all employees. We then dive deep into the concept of empathy as it is being harnessed and monetized around the world for the betterment of business and society at large, and argue for a capabilities approach to working with empathy. We also critically reflect on the methods that have been used to create community within business organisations, and share insights into the human science behind community building, and collective thinking and feeling. The solution we propose is to co-create spaces that are conducive to nurturing the practice of empathy. This is a multidimensional process which involves having a good understanding of what empathy actually is, curation, preparation, and the mindful matching of people. In addition to expanding on these dimensions, we provide tips for designing the settings for the encounter(s), and emphasize the importance of reflection and feedback, and the crucial role of consistency and repetition in habit formation. The paper concludes with a succinct overview of the outcomes we as human beings, as employees, as employers, as family members, as citizens and denizens can expect to enjoy as our empathetic capabilities increase - not only at work but also in all of our social relations and interactions.

Keywords

Future of work, COVID19, wellbeing, capabilities, empathy, community empathy, cultures of community, collective mindfulness, key performance indicator

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The Problem Statement

The twentieth century will be remembered for incredible and incredibly rapid technological advancements and the impact of globalisation on people's lives - in relation to the natural environment and in the spaces where we practice social relations (work, home, schools, clubs etc.). Speaking from the perspective of advanced and post-industrial societies, a downside of globalisation has been that the pace of work and life has increased to such an extent that the burden of stress and mental health issues on health services—not to mention the individuals and their families—started to become glaringly problematic as we moved into the twenty-first century.

To put it crudely, there was a relatively quick realisation that the traditional approaches to dealing with these matters (e.g., traditional medicine and medical practice) were both insufficient and inefficient; consequently, concepts like work-life balance, well-being and happiness came into focus. In several countries, a new industry evolved with solutions that could be taught by 'experts' and learned by consumers in order to not only reduce the burden on health care systems, but also to improve employee performance, productivity and thus positively impact the bottom line, not least through employee retention.^{1 2} Broadly speaking, initiatives have tended to focus on improving individual wellbeing, with results impacting, in the first instance, the individual and then secondarily collective human spaces, such as the workplace and the family.

The rise of the knowledge society was the catalyst for other significant changes in the way we work. One of the major developments in the labour market that impacts company culture was an increase in the numbers of people working remotely³. According to the United States Census Bureau (2013, June 3), between the 2000 and 2010 Census, the number of people working remotely rose by 35%, meanwhile Eurostat (2018, June 20) reports that the percentage of employed persons in the EU who sometimes work from home increased steadily from 7.7% in 2008 to 9.6% in 2017. Then, in 2019, something happened that only a handful of people worldwide could have predicted (and did!): a global pandemic and the shutting down of society as we know it.

Physical distancing suddenly became the norm in order to curb, if not eradicate COVID19, and remote work became a necessity for those of us working in industries (and locations) that allow it. With the closure of schools, leisure and freetime spaces, the home became the center for work, social activity and education, overnight.

As noted by D'Auria, Nielsen and Zolley (2020, May 1) and others, social isolation weakens bonds that normally provide emotional support at a time when the crisis can, and has, triggered heightened sensitivity and stress, mass-scale trauma responses to collective fears,

¹ For further reading see Harter, Schmidt and Keyes (2003).

² Examples include the [The Happiness Research Institute](#) and [Easymove](#) (Denmark); Yale University's free online course, [The Science of Well-Being](#) (US); [Wellbeing People](#) (UK); [Great Place to Work](#) (DE); [Happy Healthy People at Work](#) (FI)

³ Also referred to as remote work, telework and telecommuting.

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and collective panic. Hence, COVID19 has not only led to well-being at work becoming even more of a professional priority for individual workers⁴, it has also led to a broader recognition of how invaluable possessing and practicing human capabilities like empathy in the workplace is.

It is worthy of note that while McKinsey & Company and others in the business world are focusing attention on the importance of **empathetic leadership** during the crisis and for future recovery,⁵ and mainstream media have commended economies led by women in their response to the pandemic, citing **empathy** as a reason for their success, very few solutions have been put forward for how to implement concrete actions which address the fostering of empathy as an everyday praxis among all employees within organisations - a high-level key performance indicator (KPI) that, if adopted effectively and practiced consistently by all employees, focuses on the overall performance of the business. How might we operationalize empathy, **together**, to foster better understanding across and between departments, as well as to create inclusive teams and nurture work environments so that people not only become more productive, but also look forward to spending time at work and evolve personally and professionally?

To our knowledge, The Empathy Business, an organisation that takes a traditional consultancy approach to creating business-oriented empathy-based solutions, is at the time of writing the only international mainstream service provider offering workshops to businesses that equip employees with the “tools and techniques to practice empathy at work”.⁶ Their method is to take techniques developed for hostage negotiation and apply them to work contexts in an online learning environment. The obvious and great advantage is that the workshops may be delivered wherever and whenever. However there is a two-fold challenge: the first is that the dynamic between the service provider and the client resembles a top-down teacher-student model, which runs the risk of the client *not* feeling like an integral part of the process. This may lead to weaker engagement and negatively impact learning. The second is **the irony of aiming to increase empathetic capabilities without actual human interaction**.⁷

We strongly believe that empathy-centered transformations in and outside of the workplace have a greater chance of long-term, sustainable success if methods like the traditionally individual focused well-being initiatives, top-down learning environments and distance learning in social isolation are combined with **collective oriented** capabilities approaches that ultimately aim to achieve community empathy, that is, **Community EQ**.

⁴ Teevan, J., Brent H., and Jaffe, S. (Eds.) (2021)

⁵ See for example [Financial Management](#), [Entrepreneur](#), [Ernst & Young](#), [Business Solver](#), [Harvard Business Review](#)

⁶ See The Empathy Business homepage: <https://theempathybusiness.com/>

⁷ For further discussion on the importance of human interaction to wellness, see Wortham (2021, February 7)

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The Background

In order to better grasp the problem and ultimately the solution, we continue by highlighting the current state of work as it intersects with (post)COVID19 society. In light of the transition from thinking in terms of the individual to thinking collectively, we draw attention to the urgency and recognized need for nurturing empathetic capabilities among all employees in the context of work and wellbeing. It is also in this section that we give an overview of the different ways empathy is being used around the world as a tool for, broadly speaking, social cohesion.

COVID19 as a Catalyst for Change

There is general consensus that COVID19 has changed the world we live in on a very fundamental and intimate level. Arguably, the most significant challenge we have been faced with is the rethinking of and adjustment to how we use—and interact in—physical spaces. Due to the nature of the virus, as social beings and members of communities and broader society, we have needed to recalibrate our own physical behaviour and simultaneously adapt to the recalibrations of others - within the private space of home, as well as in the public spaces of work and leisure, and broader physical and virtual social environments.⁸ Between December 2019 and now⁹, we have seen and interacted with our colleagues, families and friends primarily in virtual rather than physical spaces, and consumed like never before online.¹⁰ We have been bombarded with messages about keeping our distance, for the good of our health and that of others, yet the longer the crisis situation goes on, the stronger our need for closeness and meaningful togetherness becomes. Alas, this is not a temporary situation: With the consequential vast improvement in digital infrastructures, thought leaders are predicting that remote work, at least in a hybrid form, will continue, business travel will shrink, and e-commerce will continue to be high. In short, in many of our spheres of life, **there will continue to be less physical contact.**¹¹



We are also witnessing another major transformation in intergroup relations, that is in interactions between individuals in different social groups, and also between groups collectively. For better or for worse, much of the coverage on the pandemic in the media focused our attention on the situation of others - how their behaviour impacts us, and how our behaviour impacts them. As such, **the**

⁸ Keywords “COVID 19 changes” gives 5.6 billion hits which is only 0.1 billion less than “COVID 19” alone. To compare further, “COVID 19 effect” gives 4.4 billion, “COVID 19 impact” gives 3.2 billion.

⁹ The time of writing is May 2021.

¹⁰ For reference to the consumption of arts and culture, see Jeannotte (2021), and for e-commerce, see Lund et. al. (2021, February)

¹¹ See for example Foreign Policy magazines series about the world after the pandemic; Microsoft’s research paper, [The New Future of Work](#); and McKinsey Global Institute’s report, [The future of work after COVID19](#);

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pandemic has compelled us to think collectively, across socio-economic, socio-political, socio-cultural divides, and across intersectional identities¹² within and outside of our communities, in a way that many of us have never experienced before. Not only have we become more knowledgeable about the lives of “others”, we have also become more mindful of our own situations and how different that may be to the situation of others, as so well-captured by the quote by British poet, Damian Barr, that went viral in May 2020: “We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are in super-yachts and some have just one oar.” The above illustration by Barbara Kelley¹³, and how we as viewers instinctively think about it, encapsulates how COVID19 has forced us to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and consider how different our perspectives may be of the “same” phenomenon. In short, our awareness of our state of interdependence (and how fragile it can be) as well as our understanding of the importance of seeing things from another perspective have been significantly heightened. This is a key skill required when practicing empathy.

Remote working under the pandemic—with its scale and duration—did not only bring work into the home, **it also brought the home into work**. Employers and employees saw each others’ abodes and met each others’ families and pets virtually; they witnessed their colleagues in their roles as mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and singles. They listened to and shared one another’s private and professional struggles and successes - **a new level of intimacy whether spoken or unspoken, wanted or unwanted occurred**. Most importantly, employers witnessed first hand how intertwined their workforce’s personal and professional lives are and how this impacts performance. While well-being perks that care for the body, such as gym and spa memberships, have for some time been an integral part of benefits packages, the recent pandemic has accelerated the acceptance of the need to respond to the care needs of the mind and spirit. In an article in Harvard Business Review, Kropp (2021, January 14) predicts that employers “will shift from managing the employee experience to managing the life experience of their employees.” And for this to happen empathy needs to be present, on both sides.

Thus, while COVID19 and the likelihood of future pandemics and lockdowns presents numerous challenges for businesses to varying extents depending on industry, it presents **a golden opportunity to innovate and make systemic changes** by responding to the need for a focus on mental health and well-being and the birth and rise of collective mindfulness, through the empathy-driven recalibration and rehumanization of social relations.

The Future is Empathy

One of the greatest barriers to the targeted learning and the mindful practice of empathy within organisations is that **it requires an emotional commitment**. Under neo-liberal capitalism there has been a strong tendency to devalue traits and feelings like emotions and empathy which were—and perhaps still are—commonly viewed as “feminine” qualities, in

¹² See Khort (2019, June 25)

¹³ The image originally featured in Noonan (2020, April 23)

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-comes-after-the-coronavirus-storm-11587684752>

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male-dominated working environments such as the office or the factory floor. In a business context therefore, empathy has been considered, at a push, a soft KPI that was difficult, if not impossible to measure. In recent years however, even prior to COVID19, empathy has been evolving as a concept to be harnessed in the business world by those brave enough to do so. The pandemic has further illuminated the need for and value of having stronger cultures of empathy within organisations and institutions in general, with *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes* and the *McKinsey Group* among others having published numerous articles centering on empathy and its importance in 21st century business life.¹⁴

James Allworth (2012, May 15) states in *Harvard Business Review* for instance that empathy is the most important thing they teach at Harvard Business School, as putting yourself in the shoes of others increases knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, companies that are able to apply this to a business setting succeed. At *Forbes*, Westfall (2021, January 15) explains how the ability to practice empathy can improve one's career impact and claims that cognitive compassion, which is a trait of empathy, is a vital leadership skill. Also in *Forbes*, Hyken (2021, November 29) predicts that empathy is "the" word for the business world in 2021; from the customer who is in need of human contact with someone who "cares", to the employee working remotely who is feeling isolated at home and is anxious about the future. He states "empathy is at the root of a successful human-to-human interaction, and when you combine that with someone who is knowledgeable and solves the problem or answers the question, you have a winning combination." Lastly, Kevin Sneader, Global Managing Partner of McKinsey & Company, predicts that in 2021, leadership capabilities will "continue to shift towards embracing empathy and demonstrating leadership in its full sense."¹⁵

Empathy is also being monetized. The UK based [The Empathy Business](#) for instance provides empathy oriented solutions for businesses (e.g. empathy audits, empathy workshops and seminars). They also came up with a methodology for a [Global Empathy Index](#) of companies for 2016. The meta-level index breaks empathy down into the categories of ethics, leadership, company culture, brand perception, and public messaging through social media, and the metrics include CEO approval ratings from staff, ratio of women on boards, and number of accounting infractions and scandals. [The Empathy Institute](#) in the US offers similar service to businesses, as well as to educational and health institutions and more. Meanwhile, [Business Solver](#) publishes an annual [State of Workplace Empathy](#) report, and UC San Diego has an [Institute for Empathy and Compassion](#). At the company level, one organisation in particular stands out: Microsoft. From the CEO openly speaking of empathy as his leadership mantra,¹⁶ to Microsoft Finland developing an interactive online resource, the [Empathy Package](#), for children, teachers and parents to combat cyberbullying, Microsoft is embracing the "superpowers" of empathy, with great success.

¹⁴ There are also others who argue against leading with empathy and instead take an MSC (mindfulness, selflessness, compassion) approach. See for example Hougaard and Carter (2018, pp.205-216)

¹⁵ See McKinsey Live (2020, December 9)

¹⁶ See Bulgarella (2018, December 4)

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Nurturing Empathetic Capabilities

In a recent article by Deloitte, empathy has been categorized as a *human* capability which, if nurtured and embraced collectively, will **act like a superpower**, not only creating competitive edge, but also allowing companies to “jump higher, run faster, see farther [and] maybe even challenge the laws of the universe” and that organisations must work to develop their employees’ human capabilities across *all* levels and departments of an organisation (Hagel, Brown and Wooll, 2020, June 26). We concur; however, the ability to be empathetic is not something that we all possess, and even those of us who do have it practice it to different extents with different groups of people. It is much easier, for instance, to be empathetic towards a person to whom we relate strongly, like a close colleague, a relative or a like-minded person, than towards a person very different to ourselves who we do not identify with very much, if at all.¹⁷ Nonetheless, one of the most striking aspects of human empathy is that it can be felt for virtually any target - not only different types of people, but also different species (Decety 2004, 72). In addition, it is something that can be taught and learned.

Taking a capabilities approach to nurturing empathy rather than simply relying on our “natural” ability is a way to even out these differences and enable us to practice empathy with a wider cross-section of people. Capability building is a well-known concept in the business world and is widely embraced as a tool for the individual development of employees in order to create new value for the company and retain talent. At the collective level, organisation(al) capabilities are understood as the outcomes of investing for instance in processes such as staffing, training, compensation and other areas of human resources.¹⁸ Although it refers to the way the collective skills and competences and the systems in a company work together, when using the term in practice, the organisation is thought of as a singular entity possessing key intangible assets relating to the social rather than technical side of work (such as being innovative, responsive and accountable etc.) that define what it is good at. Capabilities become, to some extent, dehumanised. Furthermore, investment in the aforementioned processes becomes inefficient if the employees lack the human capabilities, like empathy, that will **improve their ability to act on and react to the opportunities presented**.

At the meta level, the term has been theorized in the field of global development: Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (1993) developed a capability approach to measuring human welfare in a developmental context by shifting the focus from what citizens and denizens have the *freedom* to do regarding their own well-being, to what they are actually *able* to do to, with the goal of achieving more rapid societal development.¹⁹ Taking the individual as the

¹⁷ Bloom (2017) cited in Hougaard and Carter (2018, p. 208). One reason for this is that we use our own knowledge (including beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings) as the primary basis for understanding others (see Decety, 2004, p. 85).

¹⁸ Smallwood and Ulrich (2004, June)

¹⁹ For example, although a child - who lives with her grandparents in a remote village - has the right to attend school, she may not be able to go because she is the only person in the family who can earn money to buy food to eat. The policy solutions therefore should center less around increasing the

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given unit of analysis or object of concern in a business context, the goal is thus to provide employees with the knowledge, education and training they need to improve their *ability* to act on the freedoms that they are granted, and seize the opportunities that are laid out in front of them, which in turn will result in greater value added for the company at large. It is not only about evaluating and measuring the intangible assets like empathy that employees have, but is also about bringing them mindfully into the individual and **collective consciousness** of staff, developing them, harnessing them, rendering them concrete and making them actionable within a defined space; that is, within communities (remote or physical teams, offices, departments etc.) in the workplace and beyond.

Community Empathy as a KPI

It is well-documented scientifically that human beings are not designed to be alone - neither physiologically or psychologically. We are social animals with a basic instinct to operate collectively in groups in order to ensure the survival of our species, even if institutions like neo-liberal capitalism tell us differently. Indeed, over the past few decades, we have been encouraged that the pursuit of wealth, continuous economic growth, self-interest, individualism and competition are the route to the “ultimate goal” of human fulfilment. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, within human resource management, it is the hard, easily measurable key performance indicators KPIs—like absenteeism, turnover rate, training investment and so forth—that were for many, many years in focus. The near-blind adherence to this mantra, the intersectional biases that came with it, and the lack of attention to the impact on our natural and social environments led us down a path that among other things, made us neglect our basic human nature and the needs associated with it; namely, our need for community and our (biologically) instinctive tendency towards collectivity.

According to economist and best selling author, Noreena Hertz (2020), we have reached a point where the life experience of many people across the globe, from all social classes, ethnic backgrounds, genders and so forth, is plagued by loneliness both in the private sphere, at work and in the public space of society. Perhaps because of the stigma attached to admitting to feeling lonely,²⁰ the shocking evidence-based statistics around the health impacts of loneliness are little known, let alone talked about. Hertz states that loneliness is worse for our health than not exercising, as harmful as alcohol, twice as harmful as obesity, and the equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day regardless of earnings, age or nationality.²¹ These findings are cause for great concern. But there is hope: three of the main findings from the *Loneliness and the Workplace 2020 US Report* were that employees feel less lonely when they can **be their true selves at work**; when their **employers encourage**

number of teachers and schools in the area, and more on finding ways of enabling families to become financially secure.

²⁰ Herz (2020, pp. 21-23) argues for a redefinition of the term partly in order to break down the stigma. She believes that loneliness should be understood in broader terms and go beyond the lack of companionship, love, intimacy, caring and connection with family, friends, work colleagues and neighbours, and should include the feeling of being disenfranchised politically, being excluded from society's gains, being powerless, voiceless, cut off from the workforce and being unsupported and cared for by the state and the government.

²¹ Herz (2020, p. 17)

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a good work-life balance; and when they feel that technology is being used to help them **make meaningful connections with coworkers**, but not as a replacement for in-person interactions.²²

We propose that employers will see improvements in the aforementioned ever-salient hard KPIs—and thus the bottom line and ESG ratings²³—if they co-create a sense of community that they too are a part of, by encouraging collective mindfulness (or collectively-oriented thinking) among all employees. Moreover, if they can successfully nurture soft KPIs, or rather, human KPIs such as empathy,²⁴ using socio-technical work practices among all staff, companies will create greater value not only for the workforce (as individuals and as a collective), the company and its shareholders, but also for society as a whole, thus contributing to making positive, and importantly, sustainable systemic change. As is often said of KPIs, they are only as valuable as the action they inspire. Thus, in the face of conscious capitalism (Mackey and Sisodia 2014) and the recognition that getting back to our roots is good for business and society, **implementing initiatives that nurture Community EQ** is a must for post-COVID19 business culture.²⁵

Co-creating Cultures of Community

When the term community is used by companies, it is often in reference to support groups made up of users and consumers of a product; at Microsoft for instance, “Our community helps answer your Microsoft product and service questions with responses from other knowledgeable community members.”²⁶ Apple has similar communities for its range of products,²⁷ and LEGO supports an online community of both consumers and LEGO employees through its LEGO Ideas platform where users can share their “cool creations and creativity”.²⁸ Having a conscious and actionable shared experience or interest is the essence of this type of external organizational community. We are concerned though with how to foster community—or more broadly speaking cultures of community—internally, within organisations.

The idea of co-creating workplace communities is not new. As recently as the global financial crisis of the 2000s, there was some discussion about the need to rebuild companies as communities, that is, to reinvigorate “people’s sense of belonging to and caring for something larger than themselves”. It was felt by some that the distance and disjunct that had developed between leadership and management—which led to employees feeling disenfranchised and with no sense of belonging or responsibility to the company they were working in and for—was one of the root causes for what happened in the subprime mortgage

²² Cigna (2020, January, p. 2)

²³ Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)

²⁴ Other examples of human capabilities are courage, mindfulness and creativity.

²⁵ In the field of neuroscience EQ is used both as an acronym for both “emotional quotient” (see Goleman 1995) and “empathy quotient” (see Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004). In this paper we use the acronym EQ because it draws attention to the measurable nature of empathy.

²⁶ See <https://answers.microsoft.com/en-us>

²⁷ See Iphone for example <https://discussions.apple.com/community/iphone>

²⁸ See <https://ideas.lego.com/howitworks>

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problem in the US.²⁹ Since then, in addition to the pandemic, there have been other developments: the quality of the communication we have nowadays with our colleagues is arguably increasingly more shallow; we have, for instance, gone from popping over to a colleague's desk for a quick chat, to sending an email instead of walking over (using proper sentences and salutations), to now sending short and curt text messages with no salutations, and often not even proper sentences via email, SLACK, SMS and other digital communication channels.³⁰

Thankfully, many companies have made efforts to close this ever increasing gap or at least make it less chasmic. In particular, start-ups and successful young companies are characterised by the family feeling they are able to create by fostering a strong sense of loyalty, commitment and responsibility for not only the product and the company, but also for the collective wellbeing of the team. Sustaining this energetic engagement may however become challenging as companies scale up, and as the members of staff who are the central drivers of the community change jobs. There is a danger that the community feeling is reliant on the performative capabilities of a few and are thus unsustainable, rather than being an integral part of the company culture and thus the intuitive, instinctive or even learned, intention of the many.

In the face of this human resource challenge, the movement around “team building” has accelerated, with specific exercises or events being purposefully designed, among other things, to foster stronger connections, more collegiality, and better communication among different groups of people who work together within a company. There are many points of friction though with this pervasive strategy, if it is community development and cultural change that companies are striving for. The first is the challenge of being able to be our authentic selves during team-building exercises. In essence, most team building days require a huge amount of resources from us as individuals; there is a great expectation that we commit fully and, although it is rarely said out loud, we are expected to perform - be happy and enthusiastically engaged, whether we genuinely feel like it or not. Secondly, teams are finite entities and therefore exclusionary by nature. There is a risk that by organising such overly curated events, departments and teams develop different, potentially even contrasting, team cultures and modes of communication. Furthermore, if the team-building exercise does not suit a person's particular communication preference—for instance having introverted rather than extroverted tendencies—the risk of isolation or social exclusion for that individual within the team is immense. Lastly, there is a subtle yet stark difference between individuals wanting to be part of a team or community and individuals making the decision to join with each other to create that team spirit or sense of community. The challenge with team-building exercises is that decision-making processes are more often than not structurally imposed rather than being made by the individuals themselves, and this brings both the validity and sustainability of the imagined community or team construct into question.

²⁹ Mintzberg (2009, July-August)

³⁰ For further discussion see Hertz (2021) Chapter 7.

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According to science, human beings have a social drive which accounts for why they connect with one another to form a community. It is this drive which motivates us to connect with one another on a deeper level. Moreover, we have a need for encounters and deeper connections with others in order to develop and recognize our own personality.³¹ Community building must therefore be recognized and acknowledged as something that is self-driven by the people who are to form the members of that community. Furthermore, *being* a member of a community does not necessarily equate to *feeling* part of a community, so the question arises as to how members transition from “I” to the collective “We”. Edith Stein (cited in Pezella 2018) theorized that it happens when a group of individuals, who experience themselves as members of the community, consciously go through a meaningful transformative experience together. Strong emphasis lies in the consciousness aspect because it is that conscious acknowledgement that others are going through or experiencing the same happening, which makes it a collective feeling and emotion for the individual.

If we take the feeling of empathy as an example, as members of a (workplace) community, individuals can be nurtured to be empathetic together with other members of the community. If this happens consciously and simultaneously, I (as an employee) will be empathetic with my community (my colleagues) and my community will be empathetic with me. The individual (the “I”) therefore grasps and lives the communal (the “We”) empathy. Collective empathy becomes an object and can be understood as such by individual members of the community. Each member of the community therefore ends up experiencing both his or her own empathetic capabilities and the outcomes of showing or using them, as well as the collective empathy of the community members; **“I” becomes “we” and community empathy is achieved.**³²

In a workplace setting, the goal must therefore be to **co-create cultures of community** whereby all staff are supported in developing transformative human capabilities such as empathy as their authentic selves that are conscious, inclusionary and praxis-based, and thus transferable to not only all of the communities, but also all of the social situations, that we as human beings are an integral part of.

The Solution

We are concerned with how social relations and wellbeing among all employees within organisations can be improved and evolve such that both employees and the company can feel the benefits, not only as singular individual entities, but also as members of broader communities. We believe that the solution to this challenge is to mindfully employ socio-technological practices that enhance and evolve our (transferable) empathetic capabilities. The guidance offered below focuses on mindful curation and diligent priming in

³¹ See Mühl's (2018) reflections on German woman philosopher Gerda Walther's work on social communities.

³² This example uses Mühl's (2018, p. 53) wording to explain the process, however in the original text, Mühl utilises the concept of “sadness” not empathy.

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the co-creation of inclusive spaces - spaces that are sensitive to intersectionality and interpersonal communication preferences.

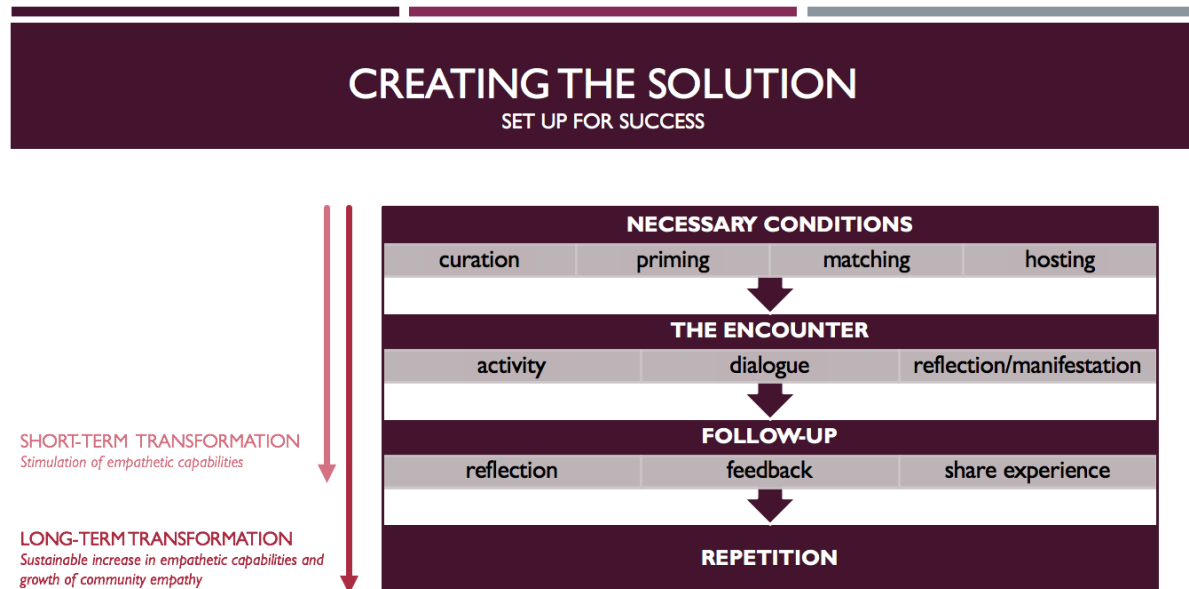


Figure 1: Creating the Solution - The Setup for Success

Figure 1 is the framework upon which any number of solutions can be built, and succeed, both in the short-term and the long-term (the main indicators are elaborated upon in more detail in the subsequent sections): There are some necessary conditions that need to be met, namely curation, priming, matching and hosting; an in-person human-to-human interaction (the encounter) must take place that involves an activity, dialogue, and space for reflection and even some kind of manifestation; an opportunity to reflect and give feedback on the experience and its design, and to share the experience with others who may or may not have been present should exist. Lastly, in order for long-term transformation and systemic change to occur, there must be repetition.

It perhaps goes without saying that the drivers of the desired change (the organisation with the solution) must be suitably prepared in order to support the agents of change (the workforce including the non-managerial staff, the management, the leadership and the executive) in adopting new behaviours and creating cultures of community empathy.

When designing a solution, and also when acting as a host,³³ strive to:

Focus on experience over opinion - empathy centers around feelings and emotions about how we experience an event, a conversation, a happening, and this is quite distinct from our opinion about it. The chosen method should therefore guide agents towards the discussion of experiences rather than opinions (e.g., how did you feel when we first went into lockdown

³³ The main source used for this list is Parker (2018).

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at Christmas vs. what do you think about the decision made by the government about going into lockdown at Christmas).

Practice thoughtful exclusion - it has been theorized that social inclusion is not possible without social exclusion.³⁴ In the case of, for instance, planning a social event, depending on the number of people invited and the dynamics within the organisation, it may be necessary to exclude senior management in order for the rest of the participants to be able to relax and be present as their authentic selves.

Connect the agents in person - Science tells us that for empathy to be practiced, in-person social interactions are necessary because we are less capable of reading non-verbal cues, for instance, via audio-visual media.³⁵ Tell people why they are matched to another agent by sharing what they have in common, and take the time for them to be introduced to each other prior to or during the encounter.

Share information about the rules and expected behaviours - Rules can create an imaginary, more playful world for the shared experience to take place if communicated in a light-hearted, personable, empathetic manner. It is therefore important to identify possible behaviours or norms which might stall or inhibit progress towards the goals. Create rules to counter them (e.g. work titles are left behind; be one's authentic self; no mobile phone usage etc.). Agents should not have to rely on etiquette, as etiquette reinforces social hierarchies.

Consider space carefully - All venues come with scripts. There are also certain established norms in different types of spaces which nudge the participants towards certain behaviours. Therefore, the venue must embody the purpose.

Curation is Key

The Oxford Lexico Online Dictionary³⁶ defines curation rather narrowly as “The action or process of selecting, organizing, and looking after the items in a collection or exhibition.” However in order to understand its impact and importance, we propose that curation be understood as *the act of evolving a functional framework consisting of different parts that, when synchronized, work together in harmony and produce a desired outcome.*

While individuals need to be the main drivers for community empathy to exist within organisations, an element of mindful curation is essential in a non-organic setting like the workplace. Curation is the key element in setting employees and employers up for success in achieving collective mindfulness and for empathy to eventually become a common praxis. The curation may be seen as the careful construction of the environment—the wind, the water, the fire, the earth—in which the process of developing stronger empathetic capabilities, and cultures of community empathy evolve organically.

The curation needed for the case in point has five key elements:

1. a clear understanding of the elements required to produce the desired outcome (*The Core: Empathy Unpacked*)

³⁴ See Dobush (2014)

³⁵ See Hertz 2021, Chapter 6.

³⁶ See <https://www.lexico.com/definition/curation>

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2. the careful unintrusive priming of the target population (*The Preparation: Priming the Workforce*)
3. a deeper understanding of key communication preferences and alternative points of connectivity among the target population (*The Matching: Alternative Commonalities*)
4. the facilitation of the provision of safe spaces for authentic interpersonal encounters to take place (*The Encounter: Meaningful Engagements*)
5. Repetition (*The New Habit: Empathy as a Praxis*)

In the following sections we elaborate on these five key elements, mindful that how they are interpreted and operationalised in different solutions may vary immensely.

The Core: Empathy Unpacked

There are hundreds of different definitions of empathy, too many to reference here, so instead we state how empathy is understood in the context of this paper:

Empathy is the ability to understand another person's perspective, feel their emotions and offer noninvasive support through active listening and nonviolent communication, while maintaining healthy emotional boundaries.

With this definition in mind, Figure 2 below unpacks all that empathy constitutes, and provides suggestions of how to operationalise it during human-to-human encounters and interactions.

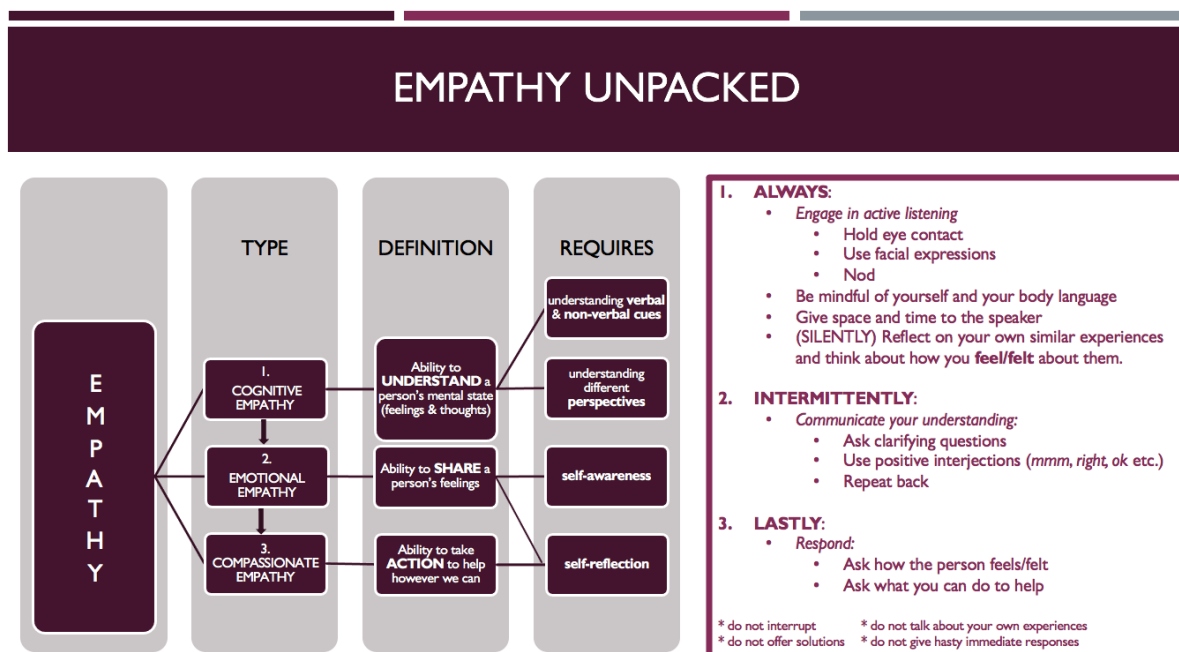


Figure 2: Empathy Unpacked - Key Elements of Empathy and Its Praxis

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We understand empathy as consisting of three different sub-categories.³⁷ **Cognitive empathy** reflects our ability to understand a person's feelings, thoughts and perspectives through both verbal and non-verbal cues. **Emotional empathy** reflects our ability to actually share another person's feelings. This entails internally recalling the emotions we felt when we last experienced that feeling, rather than simply recalling the situation in which we had a similar or same feeling. The recollection should be such that our own wellbeing is not impacted. **Compassionate empathy** reflects our ability to take action in response to what the other person has shared, without trying to solve the problem or rescue the person, and without talking about our own experiences if we have not been asked to.

Aside from requiring an emotional engagement with another human being, practicing empathy requires an engagement in active listening. This is the act of showing a person through non-verbal communication that they have your undivided attention, for instance by holding eye contact, using facial expressions and nodding and, need we say, not looking at or responding to your phone! In practicing empathy, we should be mindful of ourselves, our body language, our thoughts and not be afraid of short moments of silence which give everyone involved time to feel and reflect.

Practicing empathy requires the ability to put ourselves in another person's shoes and understand their perspective, even when it is quite dissimilar to our own. However, if we *believe* our empathy skills can be improved, it is scientifically proven that we then become more willing to try to be empathetic in tough situations.³⁸ That said, this most certainly requires more resources and training for some than for others. It is important to note that in order to practice empathy and nurture our empathetic capabilities, we must interact in social situations as our authentic selves, not the person we think that others would like or are expecting us to be. This is not always an easy task, and requires mindfulness and an acute and honest awareness and acceptance of one's "self".

The Preparation: Priming the Agents of Change

The job of the organisation is to gather all the pieces together and set things up. It is to prepare different spaces for a variety of alternative interactions (the solutions), so that the work environment, as well as those alternative interactions, are conducive to nurturing the workforce's empathetic capabilities. Part of that preparation is to make sure the people who work in the organisation are fully equipped and able to function and operate effectively in the new spaces as well as the broader working environment in pursuit of increasing their empathetic capabilities. To prime a person means to make them ready for use or action.³⁹

In general, the driver of change should:

Practice generous authority - use the power resources at the organisation's disposal to achieve outcomes which are generous for others.

³⁷ See Appendix 1

³⁸ Schumann, K., Zaki, J. and Dweck, C. S. (2014)

³⁹ The primary source for actions outlined in this section is Parker (2018).

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Protect all agents - Ensure the physical and psychological safety of all agents at all times by co-creating safe spaces.

Equalize all agents - Hierarchies and inequalities exist in almost every workplace in spite of efforts to reduce or limit them. Be mindful of their existence and take steps to mitigate this reality. Certain spaces and venues can for instance reinforce existing social hierarchies and power structures - avoid them!

Give agency to the agents - the chosen method should empower the agents and allow them to co-create the settings in which their capabilities are to be consciously nurtured.

In communications with the agents, the drivers of change should:

Design the communication flow carefully - in doing so you will be laying the groundwork for successful interactions.

Show vulnerability - if the agents are expected to operate as their authentic selves and show their vulnerabilities, the drivers of the change must do so too. Sharing experiences and feelings (even as a business entity) contribute towards advancements in collectivity and cultures of community.

Avoid otherizing - Being mindful of the collective nature of the goal and use “we” instead of “you” in communications.

Be clear about the purpose - feed the agents with a diverse array of knowledge and tools so that they are able to fully grasp the concept behind the solution, and also digest why the company has chosen to take action to increase “our” empathetic capabilities.

The Matching: Alternative Commonalities and Energy

In the initial social interactions, it is important that the agents feel very comfortable and can easily be their authentic selves. They should therefore be brought together with people with whom it will be relatively easy to be empathetic with - people not too dissimilar to themselves. Furthermore, bringing people together based solely on their common interests is not enough if the goal is for them to connect on a deeper level, as it encourages conversations based on opinions rather than emotions, and may require multiple in-person encounters to move beyond points of view and positioning on different topics. Thus, during the priming stage, as well as gathering basic profile information, the agents should be supported in sharing alternative information about themselves that is experiential rather than factual. The more curated encounters the agent participates in, the better they will become at operationalizing empathy, and so over time the agent can be matched with people whose alternative commonalities are less and less similar to their own. This gradual exposure to “different” people further down the line is *the* opportunity to significantly increase one’s empathetic capabilities.

According to the Big Five Personality Traits or the OCEAN model (openness, consciousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism)⁴⁰, people who are very agreeable and/or highly conscientious can be expected to have good empathetic capabilities, and people who are less agreeable and/or less conscientious can be expected to have poorer

⁴⁰ See Appendix 2

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empathetic capabilities. None of the other five traits can be used to estimate empathetic capabilities.⁴¹ It is important to keep in mind that the goal, however, is not to create solutions that allow us to *measure* how good or bad our empathetic capabilities are; it is to create socio-technological solutions that allow us to *improve* our empathetic capabilities, regardless of our starting point, and to strive for a culture of community empathy. The spectrum of different personality traits is also incredibly large,⁴² hence matching according to these when bringing people together should be avoided.

It is more pertinent to consider characteristics that predict how we engage with technology and also in social situations. Here we may turn to Carl G. Jung's theory of psychological types, and specifically the ways in which people direct their energies. Jung categorizes the two ends of this spectrum as extroversion and introversion.⁴³ While it is relatively common knowledge that people at either ends of the spectrum can also display traits of the "other" end, research suggests that an individual's tendency towards introversion or extroversion should be considered when matching people who are expected to interact as their authentic selves, and have the opportunity to show and improve their empathetic capabilities.⁴⁴

To summarize the findings of Whalen's (2015) study of the interactions between introverts and extroverts, pairing introverts with extroverts in one-on-one situation whether through text messaging or "chatting" online, or face-to-face (FtF) is not conducive to either of the pair being able to be present as their true selves and should be avoided. When paired introvert-introvert and extrovert-extrovert, the pairs will adapt the environment to suit their social interaction preferences. Furthermore, be mindful that extroverts will shine in FtF situations; hence, while introvert types should not feel excluded and unable to participate in these settings, neither should they feel forced to be more vocal and participatory than they wish to be. Controlled text-based virtual environments may provide a safer space for introvert types to thrive more as their authentic selves. In short, particularly in the first few encounters and depending on the number of people participating, it is advisable to avoid matching a person with strongly introverted tendencies with a person with strong tendencies towards extroversion.

⁴¹ Melchers *et al* (2016) finds that of the frequently referenced Big Five Personality Traits or OCEAN model, *agreeableness* is the personality dimension that demonstrates the highest correlation with the Empathy Quotient (EQ) as well as with the affective and the cognitive empathy subscale from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which are the two most common scales used to measure empathy. *Conscientiousness* is the second personality dimension with a large predictive value for empathy.

⁴² See Appendix 3 and Appendix 4

⁴³ According to Myers (1993), extroverts find energy in things and people, prefer interacting with others, and tend to be action-oriented. Citing Leamont (1997), Myers explains that extroverts think while talking – they like to express their thoughts verbally and often spend little time reflecting before speaking.

⁴⁴ See Whalen (2015)

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The Encounter: Meaningful Engagements

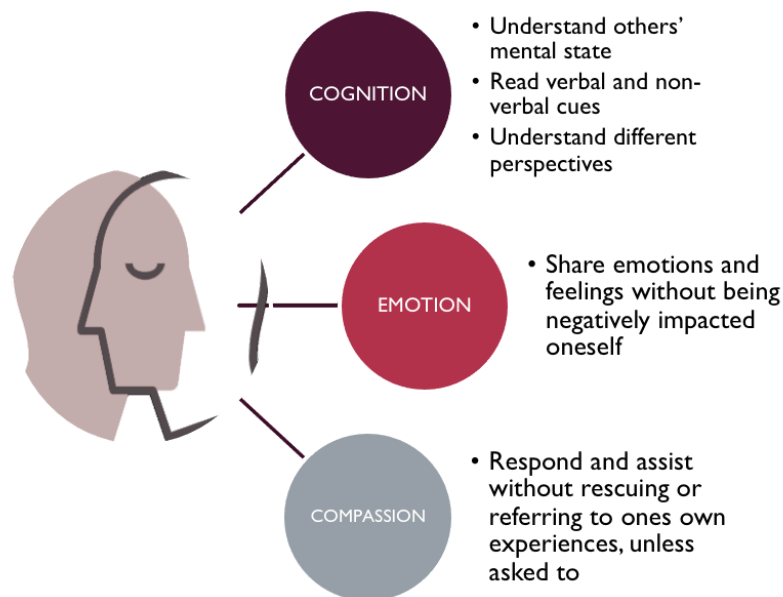


Figure 3: Practicing Empathy During Interpersonal Encounters

By the time the agents are ready to engage in a face-to-face encounter they have been primed and are ready for action; they have a full understanding of why the company has initiated this process, and why increasing all employees empathetic capabilities is good for them as an employee and a citizen, as well as for the company and society at large; they have been connected with the person/people they are to engage with during this encounter through careful matching according to their alternative commonalities and tendencies towards introversion and extroversion; and they have been briefed about the rules of engagement and practicalities regarding the ensuing encounter. The encounters should be curated with new rules of engagement in purposefully designed or chosen settings that liberate the meeting participants from the conditions that usually determine their social engagement. They are designed to transport the participants to an alternative reality where they explore new ways of being, and of understanding one another as fellow human beings in the social environment which they co-create and cohabitate.

Figuring out the venue is thus key in deciding how to nudge agents to be the fullest and most authentic version of themselves. The venue should embody the purpose of the encounter. This might be achieved by simply moving furniture around, entirely removing it, or choosing a specific alternate location. The venue should also be as neutral as possible so as not to induce or perpetuate hierarchies or expected behaviours and performance. Remember, this is not an upcycled team-building exercise!

Increasing empathetic capabilities is the ultimate goal, however, it is imperative that the agents have an immersive, engaging and meaningful experience that will be remembered for

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a long time, and one that makes them excited about the prospect of the “next” encounter. To achieve this, (without over-curating) the design should include the following elements:

- an activity, task or happening for which agents share a common responsibility (that will result in a shared emotion-evoking experience)
- opportunities for personal introspection (that will allow agents to increase their self-awareness)
- plenty of time for small talk (so that they are comfortable, relaxed and do not constantly have to be “doing”)
- a sensory experience (that will be remembered)
- crafted opportunities to practice cognitive, emotional and compassionate empathy (see Figure 3 above)

These elements do not need to be entirely separate - the sensory experience can for instance be the activity that results in the shared experience. Nothing should feel awkward or too staged, but should rather flow and take something of a natural, yet structured, course. If the experience takes an unexpected but still empathy-inducing turn, the agents should feel empowered (through good priming) to follow that course and leave the other one behind.

The New Habit: Empathy as a Praxis

Building capabilities is an ongoing process, and changing behaviour, which is essentially what we are proposing, requires reflection, repetition and conscious effort. In fact, science tells us that it takes between 18 and 254 days to change a habit, depending among other things, how consistently the behaviour is performed and the consistency of the context.⁴⁵ It is therefore imperative that the experience not be a one off stand alone event, but rather the first of a series of regularly occurring happenings that have a clearly recognizable common thread. Each time an agent participates in subsequent events or encounters, they should not feel like it is the first time. Instead, they should feel a sense of familiarity, and of being in a safe space where they are triggered, increasingly automatically, to perform the new behaviour.⁴⁶

Reflection and feedback after the experience of the event will drive the desired collective growth and make exercising empathy a common everyday praxis within your organisation. After each event or encounter, the agents should therefore be given an easy and inviting opportunity to share a reflection of their experience with the other participants and with other colleagues, whether it is sharing a photo or writing a comment in a Facebook page or WhatsApp group, or on the intranet. This may have the effect of incentivising other people to take part in future events, and it is also a strategy for documenting the process in a less formal manner. The agents should also have the opportunity to give feedback to the drivers of change, whether by email, a phonecall or via the intranet. If you choose to make a

⁴⁵ See Lally et al (2010)

⁴⁶ ‘Automaticity’ is evidenced by the behaviour displaying some or all of the following features: efficiency, lack of awareness, unintentionality and uncontrollability (Bargh, 1994, cited in Lally et al, 2010).

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questionnaire, make it very short, fun and snappy - agents should not feel burdened or that they are part of a study!

The Outcomes

Times are changing. Although neo-liberal capitalism and the challenge of ever increasing inequality persist, although remote or distance working is on the rise, although we are not yet on the other side of the pandemic, although mental health issues are impacting ever greater numbers of workers, citizens and denizens, although this is the “Lonely Century”—or perhaps because of these factors—there is a hunger for togetherness, a desire for collectivity, for being understood, and for feeling a sense of community in the workplace and beyond. The terrain is ripe for the practice of community EQ.

If successfully curated using socio-technological methods, mindfully incorporating empathy as a praxis in our business organisations will bring about systemic change with benefits for the individual, the company and for society at large, and ultimately lead to greater social cohesion. Here are some of the major outcomes we can look forward to experiencing:

A feel-good factor - Being empathetic and seeing the impact it has on others just feels good. Our brain's pleasure center lights up when we experience it⁴⁷ and this alone has numerous knock-on effects, including improving our emotional and physical well-being.

Fewer arguments and confrontational situations – Empathetic practices stave off conflict. We may find we get into fewer discussions. Even if we find ourselves in one, our empathetic responses will diffuse the flames.

Improved communication skills – Incredible things happen when we focus on listening; people feel heard and thus valued. Active listening together with being better able to understand another person's perspective and being able to read non-verbal cues will limit misunderstandings and lead to more accurate responses. Conversations will also become richer and more authentic because a safe space for expression is being co-created.⁴⁸

Sustainable efficiency – As with many other human capabilities, empathy has to be practised with the right balance; that is, with healthy emotional boundaries. If those boundaries are not enforced, inefficiency is the outcome but if maintained, *sustainable* efficiency is achieved (as opposed to efficiency that relies on work-life *imbalance*).

Expansion of our horizons – As well as being a gateway to other socially desired values (such as healing, happiness, understanding, collaboration, innovation), and prosocial behavior, practicing empathy broadens our perspectives, and helps us decipher our own values and pursue our own aspirations.

Enhanced innovation and inspiration – Honing in on the skill of active listening is key. Truly listening to the unmet needs and experiences of clients, staff or simply others and putting ourselves in their shoes broadens our minds, and can be inspiring and lead to many different types of innovation.

⁴⁷ For more on the neuroscience of empathy see Allen and Suttey (2015, December 21)

⁴⁸ For more on how psychological safety at work can also lead to higher performance see McKinsey & Company Survey (2021, February 11)

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Reduction in unconscious bias and more inclusive cultures – Actively and consciously putting ourselves in someone else's shoes (perspective-taking) leads to better understanding of another person's position. It allows us to respond better to that person's needs without judgement, which is a major step towards reducing unconscious bias, discrimination and unethical behaviour, and ultimately leads to the evolution of cultures of inclusion.

Higher performance, stronger teams, fewer absences and lower churn rate – It perhaps goes without saying that having a workforce that spends more time feeling good, that experiences fewer conflicts and misunderstandings between colleagues and with clients, that communicates well within and across departments and rank, that feel inspired and innovative, that feel included and seen for who they are will lead to fewer absences, a much lower churn rate, stronger teams and higher performance rates. Ultimately, the mindfully curated nurturing of Community EQ as an actionable key performance indicator is a human-centered method for effectively achieving numerous key business objectives, and building more robust organisations for the future.

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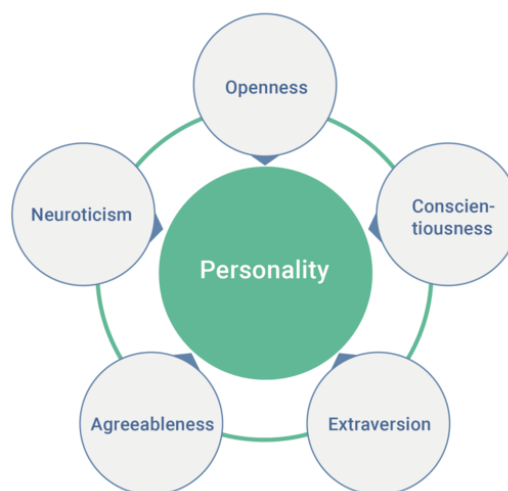
Appendices

Appendix 1: Established Methods for Measuring Empathy

Empathy has been neglected as a key performance indicator partly because of the challenge of measurement. There are however two scales that are most commonly used to measure empathy. The first and perhaps most commonly used by individuals is the **Empathy Quotient (EQ)**, originally developed by Simon Baron Cohen and Sally Wheelwright (2004) to investigate autism and empathy. The questionnaire, which can be accessed at <https://psychology-tools.com/test/empathy-quotient>, has been highly challenged and critiqued for its lack of attention to the perspective of an autistic person in the framing of the questions among other things (See Cohen-Rottenberg, no date, <https://autismandempathyblog.wordpress.com/a-critique-of-the-empathy-quotient-eq-test-introduction-and-part-1/>). The EQ measure is an aggregate score that has a three-dimensional structure, with *cognitive empathy*, *emotional reactivity* and *social skills* as underlying factors (Lawrence et al., 2004; Muncer and Ling, 2006). The questionnaire also contains filler questions that are not scored but are inserted in order to avoid consciously calculated responses by the user.

The other is the **Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)** developed by Mark H. Davis (1980, 1983), which is a measure of dispositional empathy that takes as its starting point the notion that empathy consists of a set of separate but related constructs. The test gives individual scores for *affective empathy* (empathic concern); *cognitive empathy* (perspective taking); *fantasy* grasps subjects' ability to transpose themselves into feelings, thoughts and actions of fictional characters ("other oriented"); and *personal distress* (the "self-oriented" feelings of personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings).

Appendix 2: The OCEAN Model



The OCEAN model identifies five factors:

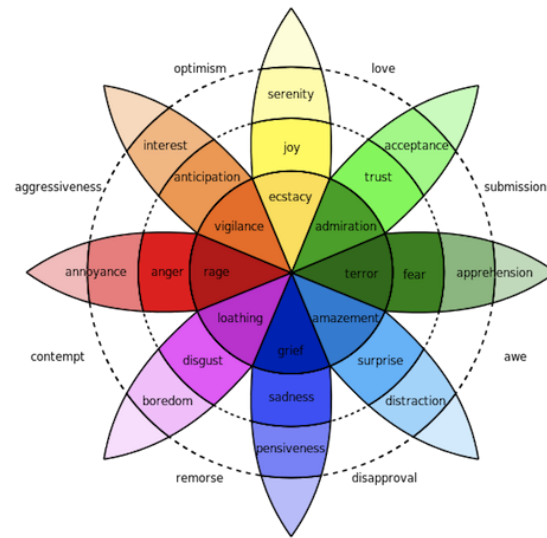
1. openness to experience (inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious)
2. conscientiousness (efficient/organized vs. extravagant/careless)

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3. extraversion (outgoing/energetic vs. solitary/reserved)
4. agreeableness (friendly/compassionate vs. challenging/callous)
5. neuroticism (sensitive/nervous vs. resilient/confident)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Five_personality_traits

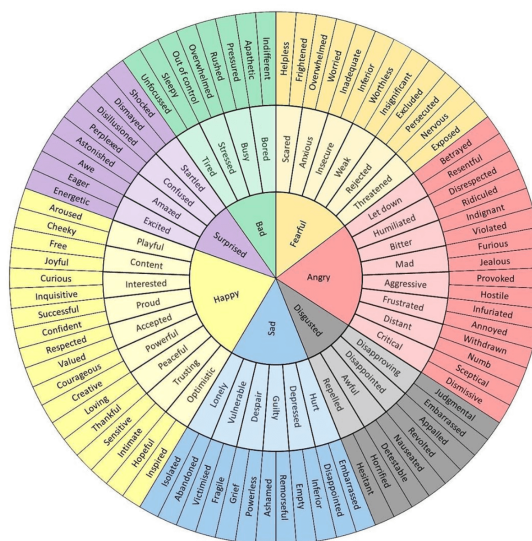
Appendix 3: Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion



Explore an interactive version of the Wheel at the source:

<https://www.6seconds.org/2020/08/11/plutchik-wheel-emotions/>

Appendix 4: An Adaptation of Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-NO7sSi0VS/>