
Five Everyday Exercises for Building Empathy



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Empathy is like a muscle - use it or lose it.

Reading a novel about grief and looking at contemporary artworks may sound like part of a liberal arts education or languid diversions of people of leisure. Of late, MBA students at Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School of Business are also engaging in such [pursuits](#) in the name of empathy. Empathy training, to be exact.

Before you dismiss it as woo-woo, Tepper's programme is only one of the latest entrants in the growing drive to incorporate empathy in the workplace, as study after study attest to the benefits of empathetic offices even though they are far from being the norm. Empathy is seen as helpful to every aspect of business, from [management and relationship building](#), negotiation and conflict resolution, sales and productivity, to customer loyalty. The top 10 companies in the [Global Empathy Index](#) 2015 increased in value more than twice as much as the bottom 10 and generated 50 percent more earnings (defined by market capitalisation), noted Belinda Parmar of The Empathy Business consultancy in *Harvard Business Review*.

Empathy, in short, is now widely recognised as an essential trait for today's workplace, in addition to being a core life skill. Courses or electives on [relationship building and self-awareness](#) are now de rigueur at top business schools including INSEAD and London Business School. An estimated [20 percent of US employers offer empathy training](#) as part of management development, or drill new hires in a skill most people naturally acquire in various degrees growing up but which has become associated with good leadership in recent years. Women seem to have a built-in edge: [A study published in the Psychoneuroendocrinology journal](#) in 2016 showed that testosterone can impair the brain function involved in recognising emotions and hence, empathy.

The 'empathy gap'

Yet surveys show that management – still very much dominated by men – and many companies are still perceived as lacking empathy. One such [assessment](#) of 15,000 leaders by Development Dimensions International showed that only 40 percent of frontline leaders were considered to be “proficient or strong in empathy”. According to the [State of Workplace Empathy Study](#), an annual survey conducted by Businessolver, 92 percent of CEOs say their organisation is empathetic, but only 72 percent of employees say they work for an empathetic employer. Businessolver calls this disconnect the “empathy gap”.

Even though 72 percent of CEOs said the state of workplace empathy needs to change, many appear to lack good ideas on how to go about it. In fact INSEAD Adjunct Professor Graham Ward wrote in [Knowledge](#) that many executives he had worked with do not even have the basic emotional vocabulary necessary to understand the complex emotions that exist in organisations and society.

The question, then, is can one learn to be *more* empathetic, whatever the gender and natural disposition?

Flexing the empathy muscle

The short answer is yes. As Jamil Zaki, professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab, writes in [Harvard Business Review](#), the first step towards building empathy is acknowledging that it is something that can be built. And, as I explain in my new book [Heartificial Empathy](#), here are five of the best ways to

strengthen your empathy muscle:

1. Listen actively

Practice active listening by reformulating the message to the person who just said it. You could do this with anyone, perhaps starting off in low-risk situations, such as the cashier at your local market or the restaurant waiter. Observe the nonverbal cues. The key is to focus on the intended meaning and feelings of the person you are interacting with.

2. Explore differences

Put yourself in environments where people are from different backgrounds. For example, you might want to join a local community outreach group or volunteer in a charity shop. Immerse yourself in the diversity of others' experiences.

3. Read fiction

Literature exposes you to the intricacies and inner workings of complex characters you don't get to "meet" otherwise. [Research](#) has highlighted a connection between literature and enhanced emotional skills, whether in primary school students or avid readers like former US President Barack Obama. Fiction apparently tricks our minds into thinking we are part of the story, and the empathy we feel for characters wires our brains to have the same sensitivity towards real people. Tepper's approach, therefore, is grounded in science.

4. Practise mindfulness

Mindfulness and meditation are all about focusing on the here and now. And one certainly needs to be "present" when listening to someone else in order to empathise with them. My preferred mindfulness guide is Monique Rhodes's [The 10 Minute Mind](#).

5. Remember why

If you know why you want – or need – to be more empathetic, you will create the environment, set aside the time and make the effort. If Obama, Bill Gates and Sheryl Sandberg can make time for reading fiction, what excuse do you have?

This blog post is based on the book, [Heartificial Empathy: Putting Heart into Business and Artificial Intelligence](#), now available from DigitalProof Press.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/five-everyday-exercises-building-empathy>

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Minter Dial is a renowned international speaker, author and filmmaker and a recognised expert on branding, new tech and digital strategy.