

# An Infusion of Empathy, Part 2: The Empathy Elixir for Innovation and Change

By David A. Shore, Ph.D., Harvard University

The following is the second article in a three-part series that looks in-depth at the power of empathy as a valuable asset to enable innovation and change in healthcare organizations.

**E**mpathy is one of the most powerful tools at an organization's disposal, both in combating COVID-19 and contributing to innovation and change. Empathy is predicted to be a key differentiator between companies that will thrive after the pandemic and those that will fall to the disruption. However, not all employees have the same outlook on their organizations' ability to be empathic. In one survey, executives were 16 percent more likely than individual contributors to have a positive view of how their organization has empathized with their individual circumstances during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

There are limits to empathy along with a cautionary note around empathy fatigue. Researchers have long known that empathy does not necessarily lead to action. Nor, does mere rhetoric about the need to empathize change behavior. What we *really* need to practice are exercises that can lead to action.<sup>2</sup>

Empathic physician communication is defined as a physician's recognition or elicitation and response to patients' concerns in order to communicate understanding, alleviate distress, and provide support.<sup>3</sup> It has been associated with higher rates of patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, and enablement across a number of studies.<sup>4</sup> It also leads to lower levels of psychological distress.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, physicians working in oncology settings frequently (70-90 percent) "miss" empathic opportunities,<sup>6</sup> which occur when

such an empathic opportunity is presented by a patient and not responded to by a physician.

The poet Maya Angelou reminds us, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Empathy is effective in part because it doesn't require a solution. It only requires understanding. The next step would be to take action (compassion).

## The Connection between Innovation and Empathy

Innovation requires connecting with the world and affecting it in meaningful ways. Innovation and change emanate from a place of empathy and compassion ("I feel your pain" and "I want to do something about it"). Without an empathic disposition, the ability to imagine what a situation is like for others becomes difficult and will diminish creative problem solving. If we cannot empathize with the struggles of others, how will we create innovative solutions to meet the needs of the populations we serve? This helps explain why empathy for the people you help is the first step in design thinking. Determining what people want and need is the first essential step to giving it them.

What do we mean by empathy in terms of creativity and innovation? As David Kelley, founder of the world-renowned design consultancy IDEO states, "For us, it's the ability to see an experience through another person's eyes, to recognize why people do what they do. It's when you go into the field and watch people interact with products and services in real time—what we sometimes refer to as

## Key Board Takeaways

- Empathy alone does not necessarily lead to action. Leaders need to implement exercises that build empathy *and* facilitate change.
- Design thinking informs human-centered innovation. When design principles are applied to strategy and innovation, the success rate dramatically improves.
- The empathy-building activities in this article build stakeholder intimacy—a deep, visceral knowledge of stakeholders, their problems, and their needs.

'design research.' Gaining empathy can take time and resourcefulness. However, there is nothing as beneficial as observing the person you're creating a product or service for to spark new insights. When you specifically set out to empathize with your end user, you must remove your own ego from the equation. Determining what other people actually need leads to the most significant innovations. In other words, empathy is a gateway to the better and sometimes surprising insights that can help distinguish your idea or approach.<sup>7</sup>

Design thinking informs human-centered innovation. It begins with developing an understanding of customers' or users' unmet or unarticulated needs. When design principles are applied to strategy and innovation, the success rate dramatically improves. Design-led companies have outperformed the S&P 500 over a 10-year period by an extraordinary 211 percent.<sup>8</sup>

We find that many organizations don't have an innovation problem. Instead, they have a trust and empathy problem. Empathy has proven to be an effective tool in convincing people of the merits of change. Innovation

1 Kotter and Entromy, *Managing COVID-19 Challenges + Identifying Opportunities: How Does Your Organization Compare?*, Kotter, 2020.

2 J. M. Darley and C. D. Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 27, 1973; pp. 100-108.

3 C. Pehrson, et. al., "Responding empathically to patients: Development, implementation, and evaluation of a communication skills training module for oncology nurses," *Patient Education and Counseling*, Vol. 99, No. 4, 2016; pp. 610-616.

4 F. Derksen, et al., "Effectiveness of empathy in general practice: A systematic review," *British Journal of General Practice*, Vol. 63, No. 606, 2013 (pp. e76-e84); S. S. Kim, et. al., "The effects of physician empathy on patient satisfaction and compliance," *Evolution & the Health Professions*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004 (pp. 237-251).

5 S. Lelorain, et al., "A systematic review of the associations between empathy measure and patient outcomes in cancer," *Psychooncology*, Vol. 21, No. 12, 2012 (pp. 1255-1264).

6 L. Hsu, et al., "Providing support to patients in emotional encounters: A new perspective on missed empathic opportunities," *Patient Education and Counseling*, Vol. 88, No. 3, 2012 (pp. 436-442).

7 Tom & David Kelly, "Thayer School Investiture 2014: David Kelley's Speech" (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=5wvWZJ5muF8&t=3m46s>); and David & Tom Kelley, *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All*, Penguin Random House, 2013.

8 2015 Design Value Index created by the Design Management Institute and Motiv Strategies. The Design Management Institute DMI Value Index 2015, retrieved from [www.dmi.org/page/2015DVlandOTW](http://www.dmi.org/page/2015DVlandOTW).

and change start with empathy and open dialogue.

## Empathy-Building Activities

If there is a “secret sauce” to empathy, it is stakeholder intimacy—a deep, visceral knowledge of stakeholders, their problems, and their needs. By extension, empathic leadership involves empowering employees so they feel that they are helpful in fulfilling a meaningful mission. Leaders must be empathic in order for their teams to be empathic. One way to accomplish this is to immerse people into the world of those you are trying to help.

Multiple paths to empathy should be included in the manager’s tool kit. Empathy can take people out of their comfort zone (e.g., “I wasn’t taught that in business school”). Listening with empathy means striving to really understand what the person is going through. Empathy comes more easily to some, but it is a skill that can be learned using the empathy-building exercises below.

**Become a “questionologist.”** There is great value in trying to meet people where they are; to understand what is preventing them from adopting change, and to support and mitigate the barriers to change. Master clinicians and great leaders ask non-judgmental questions, and then they shut up and listen. After all, we enter a crisis knowing only about 20 percent. The other 80 percent is discovery.<sup>9</sup> Questions such as, “how do you feel about this change?” or, “what about this change makes it difficult?” open the door to problem-solving. Listening with empathy involves active listening to really understand what the person is experiencing. Asking team members how they feel and validating those feelings is a powerful exercise that can reduce the raw intensity of an emotion by bridging the gap between thoughts and feelings.

Humble inquiry<sup>10</sup> focuses on building trust with the other person. With humble inquiry, you must explore the reasoning behind their behavior in an unbiased and non-judgmental way.

**Acknowledge the current state.** Another early step in expressing empathy is to verbally acknowledge one’s expressed fear, anxiety, or any other related manifestation of distress.

Since empathy does not come easily to all, these examples illustrate possible responses. This acknowledgement can take the form of an empathic personalized response that uses “I” statements such as:

- I understand why you are frustrated.
- I will discuss your concerns with the leadership team and try to find a resolution.
- I recognize it’s overwhelming when staff members aren’t feeling well.
- I’m sorry you are going through this.
- I know this must be really difficult.
- How can I help you with this?
- Thank you for sharing this with me. (Default for when you are not sure what to say.)

**Assess the current state.** Collect survey data on the current state with polling questions such as: Do you feel your organization/manager nurtures empathy? Is empathy one of your organization’s core values? Do you think empathy from your manager would be valued in your organization? You need to meet people where they are and attempt to understand where their resistance is coming from. The first step to mitigating the barriers comes from a place of empathy.

**Paraphrase.** Repeat what is said to you in your own words to make sure you’re hearing correctly, or ask questions to clarify their meaning. A form of teach-back, in which you repeat back what you heard in a different way to confirm understanding, has great value on multiple levels. Leaders often find it fruitful to mirror statements back in the form of questions, creating deeper conversations that go beyond roadblocks:

- If I’m understanding correctly, you’re upset because...
- Let me know if this is correct (insert what you believe is the issue)
- What you’re saying is...
- It sounds like the issue is...

**Validate their emotions.** Even if you don’t agree with an opinion, you can acknowledge the person’s right to their feelings. Empathy fights fear.

**Case vignettes.** Another tool for your toolbox is to posit case vignettes or concerns and have teams develop empathic responses:

- Considering COVID, I don’t know if it’s safe to come to work.
- The team just learned about the change initiative and is getting really worried.
- We didn’t need this right now. We are short two team members and I know this is going to be time-consuming.

We find opening statements such as, “I hear you and I know how hard this is for you” go a long way in soothing anxiety. In the absence of such responses, team members often minimize their fears, while hiding uncomfortable feelings.

**Volunteering.** Based on a belief that awareness is the first step to resolving any problem, many Singapore school students are required to visit charity organizations or nursing homes once or twice a year.

Other empathy-building activities include sitting in the “hot seat,” in which stakeholders must take a view contrary to their own, and practicing mindfulness techniques. Collectively, the purpose of these activities is embodied in a quote from Dwight Eisenhower: “Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you’re 1,000 miles away from a cornfield.”

The next step for boards is to discuss these empathy-building activities with their CEOs and determine effective ways to build them into the culture and day to day operations of the organization. The final article in this series will illuminate some key ways to build a culture of empathy, including the role of the board.

*The Governance Institute thanks David A. Shore, Ph.D. for contributing this article. Dr. Shore is a former associate dean of Harvard University where he continues to teach and lead professional development programs. He is also the former distinguished professor of innovation and change at Tianjin University of Finance and Economics (China). He serves on various boards including McKinsey & Company and the Marshfield Clinic Health System. He is senior consultant on innovation at the United Nations. He can be reached at [dshore@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:dshore@fas.harvard.edu).*

9 David A. Shore and Raman Gandhi Solanki, “How Sympathy, Empathy, and Compassion Can Help Workplaces Survive the Pandemic,” *Yahoo! Finance*, August 14, 2020.

10 Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013.