

# An Infusion of Empathy, Part 3: Take a Walk for Change

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The following is the final 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.

The first two articles in this series examined empathy in the context of our current healthcare environment, as the coronavirus pandemic has retold us of our intensifying need to find better ways to address the human side of care. We recalled the important lesson from anthropologist Margaret Mead that the first sign of civilization was a mended femur bone, evidence that those around this human being took the time to help them recover. We considered compelling reasons why putting human needs first using empathy as a lens allows the business aspects to better fall into place. We have learned that empathy alone does not lead to action; most importantly, leaders need to implement exercises that both build empathy and facilitate change. This final article focuses on some key ways to build a culture of empathy, including the role of the board.

For many, when “empathy” is mentioned, the first image that comes to mind is walking in someone else’s shoes. To cultivate empathy, you are invited to see life through someone else’s perspective. However, even if one could do this, what would it look like? It’s not enough to “talk the talk”—leaders must walk it as well. I have frequently observed that the best professionals are those who have one foot in the library and one foot in the street. This allows theory to inform practice, and practice to inform theory. The first step in an empathy walk is to know your purpose. If you don’t know



why you are there, then there is no point in being there.

Parents develop empathy for teachers once they themselves become teachers at home for their own children. Physicians develop greater empathy for patients after they have experienced a significant personal medical encounter. When they return to work, their patient satisfaction scores rise. Be mindful of the struggle of others, not just your own struggle.

Empathy, or the ability to place oneself in another’s shoes, serves as a catalytic agent for becoming a higher performing individual or organization. As I have found in my related work on trust, there is a universality to the value of understanding the experience of others. Empathy allows you to communicate with care. Empathy walks are one external manifestation of this. Without empathy walks, individualistic leaders are limited by their own experience and incapable of envisioning possibilities outside their personal sphere.

We recognize that if you want to know what the customer buys, you need to look through the customer’s eyes. The closer you are to something, the more it reveals itself to you. Yet, most managers know very little about how the age of COVID is impacting their team, both as people and colleagues.

The empathy revival process doesn’t just happen. Initiatives involving children are noteworthy. Harvard’s Making Caring Common Project has outlined five steps to strengthen empathy in a school’s community. The first step is for educators to model empathy by attempting to see things from the student’s point of view. In Denmark, there are compulsory empathy classes known as *Klassens Tid*. Every week for an hour, students are required to listen to each other, discuss their problems, and work together to find solutions. Perhaps as an aside (and perhaps not), Denmark consistently ranks as one of the happiest places in the world.

## Key Board Takeaways

### Bridging the Know-Do Gap

Empathy is a teachable skill; however, before it can be operationalized, it must be institutionalized. The tone is set at the top. If you don’t have an empathic board, it is not modeling the behavior you want to see in your organization. Take on *ownership of empathy* as a core value of the board, and then enable the leadership team to put tools in its toolbox:

- Add empathy as a core organizational value and socialize empathy through communication and activities organization-wide. Consider mandating empathy training as part of the organization’s workforce development training curriculum.
- Include empathy walks as part of the onboarding process for all new board members. Initiate annual empathy walks for existing board members, and in advance of commencing strategic planning.
- This is also the time for boards and leadership to address gaps in their core skills.

I have lost count of the board members and executives who have referred to empathy as a “warm-fuzzy concept” that isn’t measurable and doesn’t accomplish anything. Now, it is an imperative. It’s time to reclaim empathy as a force for good.

My own journey was enriched two decades ago when I had the great honor to share the Harvard University podium for three days with a Tibetan Lama. He had just written a powerful book that guides us on how to respond with compassion and mercy to illness.<sup>1</sup> This three-day seminar was a game-changer for me. I learned far more than I taught and was introduced to the Tibetan belief system. Among the concepts that have continued to guide my own teaching and consulting is the understanding that even if we are saddened because we cannot cure everyone, we can find some joy if when we do attempt to help, our effort is 100 percent. I began to grasp an understanding that as much as compassion is a crucial part of caring that helps people heal, it can also help colleagues heal. It was at that time that

1 Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche and David R. Shlim, *Medicine and Compassion: A Tibetan Lama’s Guidance for Caregivers*, Simon & Shuster, 2001.

I began formulating the PSEC model (pity, sympathy, empathy, compassion; depicted in the first article of this series) and came to understand that what we want in a healer is what we want in a manager: empathy and compassion.

The argument for stepping into another's shoes is that it is far more challenging to design solutions for problems you yourself have never experienced. Empathy walks and other strategies allow you to get "underneath the iceberg" and determine what motivates individual behavior. It is not until you actively listen and put yourself in others' shoes, that you give the individualized attention deserved.

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The objective of empathy walks is to trigger greater understanding between people. Walking together to see places and layers through the lens of the guide's eyes enhances awareness. Choosing who leads the walks is crucial. Imagine how your leadership team might feel after a guided walking tour led by immigrants in which your team follow their daily paths. Walking other people's paths can trigger understanding of each other's experiences, and supports a positive coexistence. It is a catalyst for understanding diversity. Empathy walks often lead to compassionate actions. So, **let's walk together, in each other's shoes.** We all see life through the think lenses of our own experience.

Include empathy walks as part of the onboarding process for all new board members. Initiate annual empathy walks for existing board members, and in advance of commencing strategic planning. Consider mandating empathy training as part of the organization's workforce development training curriculum. Unlike some other KPIs, empathy is hard to measure, quantify, or test—but it can be done. This is an area where board expertise will be invaluable. Seattle's Virginia Mason Medical Center enjoys the reputation it has cultivated and all the benefits that accrue in good measure because of its Gemba walks on the Toyota Production line in

Japan—a prerequisite for serving on the Virginia Mason board.

### **Making It Happen: The Role of the Board in Building a Culture of Empathy**

Empathy building is a change initiative that is not currently in the woodwork of most healthcare organizations. The coronavirus pandemic has emphasized the critical need for trauma-informed managers and boards. The responsibility of the board is to establish a tone of empathy as a value and then hold leadership accountable to put the right toolbox in place.

Empathy is a foundational component of a higher performing organization, and as such, commands board engagement. Along with participating in empathy training, boards can play a central role in advancing the addition of empathy to the organization's core values, thus it becomes a North Star.

This is also the time for boards and leadership to address gaps in their core skills. Not surprisingly, when managers are asked what they value most in their team members, common responses include strong work ethic, dependable, self-motivated, organized, and productive. When we ask this same question of stakeholders, they consistently respond that they are looking for managers and organizations that "care about them." Upskilling for boards and leadership teams begins with minimizing attempts to anesthetize issues of the heart and rather proceed in mending femurs.

The failure to translate what is known to work into the care patients receive is dubbed the "know-do gap." This may be the biggest hurdle to successfully launching, leading, and realizing value from change initiatives. To bridge the know-do gap, boards need simple, scalable solutions.

We must help managers understand that empathy is not a weakness, and emphasize how much easier it is to design solutions to problems when you have stepped into others' shoes. Our current state only serves to reaffirm the importance of leaders and managers becoming more empathic and thus more resilient, not only with themselves, but also with others. Many leaders and managers have been emotionally hijacked by our current state and therefore fail to realize that they have a crucial role in empathizing

and supporting their people and teams to transition safely and effectively.

Empathy is a teachable skill and should be taught. However, before it can be operationalized, it must be institutionalized. This is a compelling role for a governing body. Leaders must explore adding empathy and/or compassion to the organization's core values. Values such as respect, responsibility, integrity, resilience, and care are familiar core values in healthcare delivery organizations. These values are directly related to empathy, as they encourage one to place the needs of others before oneself. Adding empathy is a natural extension of the family-/patient-centered core value present in many healthcare delivery organizations. Organizations may also use their most cherished value to position themselves. For example, a hospice in Decatur, Georgia is named Symponia House. "Symponia" is the Greek word for compassion and can be translated as "to share the pain and act." Symponia House's slogan is, "We are compassion."

Over the next three years, we will see leading organizations make hyper-personalization in customer care a top goal. This begins with knowing your customers. Truly knowing your customers begins with empathy. Empathy and compassion soften resistance, build trust, foster engagement, improve outcomes, and catalyze innovation and change. It is hard to think of a more central goal for governing boards and senior leadership teams. In driving the future, boards do not want transformational change—they want transformational advantage. This requires socializing empathy on an enterprise-wide basis.

*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. He is senior consultant on innovation at the United Nations. He can be reached at [dshore@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:dshore@fas.harvard.edu).*