

The need for empathy in school leadership

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Introduction

Hughes et al. (2005) state that empathy is an essential skill for leadership in any field. This paper reviews the literature on the importance of empathy by exploring the applications of benefits in other professions such as nursing, and transferrable lessons can be learned. For school leaders, having an emotionally intelligent understanding of what they need in order to perform successfully can also support how they manage their team to bring out the best in all team members. Finally, this paper aims to make recommendations for governing bodies and headteachers to identify what empathetic leadership might look like and how headteachers with the right empathy skills can be specified for future recruitment.

Measuring an individual's ability to read the emotional state of colleagues or employees is a vital first step to seeking methods to train managers to be more effective at understanding their teams and improving productivity. Sani (2009) reinforces the importance of individuals having emotional intelligence and empathy by stating that those with high social awareness and emotional recognition have well-developed social skills and can use these skills to nurture positive relationships with others. However, this alone does not correlate with the individual being good at

their job. We take the example of nurse leaders during the pandemic to draw parallels with the importance of empathy for school leaders in enabling their school teams to provide the best education for their students. If school leaders can reflect on the level of empathy in their leadership decisions, they will succeed in improving the performance of their teams, especially during times of increased strain. Being clear about what we mean by empathy in leadership and the advantages for leaders is crucial for considering how we might value and learn from research into empathy.

What are empathy and emotional recognition?

Empathy is a subset of emotional intelligence; having the ability to empathise with other people is defined as recognising emotions, understanding other people's views and dealing with differences respectfully (Goleman, 2009). In leadership, empathy is an advantage, helping the leader to understand where team members stand emotionally and then steer the team in a common direction, while being sensitive to the disposition of others. In normal times, empathy can be a powerful tool for managers wishing to know how to get the best from their teams. Overall, this will allow leaders to unite teams to enhance every member's ability.

One of the principal forms of leadership that draws on empathy to support all team members is the servant leadership approach (Bruce-Golding, 2021). This form of leadership demonstrates a role for leaders whereby they understand their teams, working to effectively use every member's strength and deploy them most effectively. It is also essential for leaders adopting the servant leadership approach to understand their teams and effectively manage all members, especially marginalised staff members, to perform effectively. Team members who may have disabilities in some aspects of their lives will not be prevented from contributing within their job role when leaders work proactively to remove barriers, by understanding what these members require to perform as effectively as team members without disabilities. Common workplace hazards such as stress can be mitigated easily when leaders genuinely investigate where these hazards exist and work with staff to mitigate and remove sources of stress for staff members.

These lessons of empathy and leadership models can be helpful in order for school leaders to consider their practices and how to enhance the performance of their staff. Checking their empathy and understanding of their teams will allow leaders to make sure that they are honestly dealing with problems that matter to their team members and may potentially be causing workplace hazards such as stress. The potential applications of this can also be explored through observing other professions and how empathy skills in leadership bring about benefits for leaders and their teams.

Working under extreme pressure, making rapid decisions, can be viewed as one test of empathy. Working through the COVID pandemic has been a significant test of leadership skills, providing a lens for the acute need for empathy in leadership roles. Lambert (2021) highlights how empathy can be vital for leaders in nursing to ensure that their staff perceive themselves as valued members of a team, working cohesively. Without these skills, leaders in nursing are less likely to lead teams where all members feel included and invested in a common goal.

How might empathy be useful for headteachers?

The COVID-19 pandemic had a wide-ranging impact on all public services, including schools. With key points of the year needing planning and information to be delivered to parents and students, such as external exams, school reopening and school-based testing, a considerable burden of pressure was put on school leaders. This was exacerbated by a refusal to engage in contingency planning by the English government, followed by last-minute decision changes, from the initial school closures to present-day school-based testing.

Among this succession of quick change, school leaders had to organise home learning, the refurbishment and delivery of additional IT equipment and then on-site risk assessments, with students kept apart in bubbles. This involved many fast-paced and high-pressure decisions that needed to be made, with the wellbeing of a vast number of people being taken into consideration.

The interests of the health and safety of the people involved were evident, especially when newspaper articles and teacher unions featured criticisms of the government and how the advice given to headteachers that was reportedly intended to keep students and staff safe was contradictory and inflammatory.

Navigating through the confusion created from the loud voices and trying to do what is best for students, teachers and the rest of the school's community then became the unenviable job of school leadership. Judging how to implement certain aspects of policy and the impact on students and teachers was a challenging role for all school leaders, but one that would rely on their skills of empathy. Through using empathy to understand their staff's situation, headteachers might find that they can better help and support their team. All staff, but especially staff with disabilities or those from minority groups, will benefit from being better understood by school leaders, which can lead to them asking for help and being more effective teachers (Wood and Happé, 2021).

Headteachers needed to communicate with their teams and bring them together, pulling in the same direction. To do this, they needed to empathise with where their teachers were emotionally and physically and how to give those teachers the resources necessary to serve their community. Where this wasn't achieved, some teachers struggled with unrealistic demands and, without the support that they needed, found themselves failing those professionals and the students that they were trying to help. Reasonable adjustments to working practice were not provided and, as a result, teachers could not work at their best and children and staff suffered. Where this was done successfully, teachers were looked after and were able to work collaboratively as part of a school team, working to provide the best care and education for their community.

Having headteachers that lead with empathy means that students will have teachers who have the time and energy to care for them. When teachers are not burnt out with unrealistic demands, they can perform their roles more successfully, and the quality of teaching and learning will improve.

Measuring empathy

There are various methods that can be used to attempt to measure a person's level of empathy. These can range from questionnaires to more direct measures such as electroencephalograms (EEGs) (Lambert et al., 2021). While these measures might be a little extreme and not necessarily helpful, the desire to select a candidate with empathy is something that governing bodies or trustees should share. The right candidate can facilitate and empower all staff to feel included and empowered. The wrong candidate might do the opposite, which at worst can create a sense of exclusion for the team and students.

What remains clear, and can be recommended from this paper, is that school leaders need empathy to be effective. Scenario-based questions are often used in interviews and might offer some insight. It might also be that the only real method of knowing whether a candidate may or may not have the ability of empathy is their track record, demonstrating emotional intelligence and empathy when leading teams.

For those who are already in post, be that headteachers, leaders within schools or teachers, we can always continue to develop our levels of empathy. Empathy can be learned and developed through regular practice; see **Table 1** for some examples of activities to help develop empathy.

Domains of emotional intelligence that include empathy	Practical activities to help improve your emotional intelligence and empathy
Self-awareness	Keep a journal: Journals help you to improve your self-awareness. If you spend just a few minutes each day writing down your thoughts, this

can help you to become more self-aware.

Slow down: This is difficult, as we are all so busy. But when you experience anger or other strong emotions, slow down to examine why. Remember, no matter what the situation, you can always choose how you react to it.

Self-regulation

Know your values: Do you have a clear idea of where you absolutely will not compromise? Do you know what values are most important to you? If you know what's most important to you, then you probably won't have to think twice when you face a moral or ethical decision.

Hold yourself accountable: Do you tend to blame others when something goes wrong? If so, stop. Make a commitment to admit to your mistakes and to face the consequences, whatever they are, and you'll quickly earn the respect of those around you.

Practise being calm: How do you react when you are in a challenging situation? Practise deep-breathing exercises to calm yourself. Also, try to write down all of the negative things that you want to say and then rip it up, without showing anyone, and throw it away. Expressing these emotions on paper is better than speaking them aloud to your colleagues

Motivation

Re-examine why you're doing your job: It's easy to forget what you really love about your career. So, take some time to remember why you wanted this job.

Be hopeful and find something good: Motivated leaders are usually optimistic, no matter what problems they face. Adopting this mindset might take practice, as you may have to retrain your brain, but it is worth it.

Empathy

Put yourself in someone else's position: Take the time to look at situations from other people's perspectives.

Pay attention to body language: Perhaps when you listen to someone, you cross your arms, move your feet back and forth, or bite your lip. This body language tells others how you really feel about a situation. Understanding body language is a real asset to leaders, because you'll be better able to determine how someone truly feels.

Respond to feelings: You ask a member of your team to work late – again. And although they agree, you can hear the disappointment in their voice. Respond by addressing their feelings. Tell them that you appreciate how willing they are to work extra hours, and that you're just as frustrated about working late.

Social skills

Learn how to resolve conflict: Leaders must know how to resolve conflicts between their team and patients, and their families.

Improve your communication skills: Think about how you communicate – not just what you say, but the tone in which you say it.

Learn how to praise others: As a leader, you can inspire the loyalty of your team simply by giving praise, but only when it's earned. Over-praising may result in the praise becoming meaningless and losing its value.

Table 1: Domains of emotional intelligence and activities to help to improve these

These skills are not exclusively for head teachers. Anyone working in the complex environment of a school setting would be able to benefit from developing their levels of empathy, from teaching assistants and teachers, through to senior leaders, members of a trust or governors. As professionals within education, we all have a responsibility to model and demonstrate high levels of empathy with those that we teach and colleagues with whom we work alongside. We should highlight those who do not display the levels of empathy that we would expect in order to maintain a healthy learning environment.

Conclusion

For effective school leadership, empathy matters. In this work, we have reviewed the critical role of emotional intelligence, allowing school leaders to evaluate what their teams need in their workplace or from their team leaders to perform at their best. Without this, reports of stress from teachers and school leaders may continue to increase, leading to poor outcomes for students.

As a profession, we need to acknowledge the value of empathy in teachers and leaders, especially in challenging contexts. Perhaps once we start to look for and acknowledge good practice in empathy for school leaders, we can become more proficient at identifying the potential in teachers, as they are the future leaders of schools. To help school teams manage current challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or more long-term challenges, such as teacher retention, ensuring that our leaders are encouraged to lead in an emotionally intelligent way is vital.

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