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Upfront

The Importance of being Empathetic **Emotional intelligence keys the emergence of group leaders**

By Gerald Burstyn

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ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

The Importance of Being Empathetic

Emotional intelligence keys the emergence of group leaders

Emotional intelligence has become a buzz phrase among management gurus who claim that awareness of your feelings, and the feelings of those around you, will make you a better performing manager or employee.

Is it possible that they're on to something?

Apparently so, according to a report published last year in the *Leadership Quarterly* (13), which suggests that empathy – a key aspect of emotional intelligence – is a characteristic of group leadership.

The study, headed by Steven B. Wolff, a professor at the Marist College School of Management, hypothesized that empathy – how accurately people interpret or read the “moods, feelings, or nonverbal behavior of others” and how well they understand what motivates those around them – is a key characteristic of group leadership.

To test their hypothesis, they studied 382 graduate students who were organized into work teams at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. Students' empathy was measured through interviews at the beginning of the program. Interviewers asked students questions about prior work events, such as “What led up to the event?” “Who did and said what to whom?” and “What were you thinking or feeling at that moment?”

The work teams stayed together and cooperated on school projects and studies. After working together for three months, students voted on team leaders.

The researchers found that those chosen as group leaders had displayed empathy – that is, they actively sought

“to identify with another's emotions.”

“This may be because emergent leaders need to understand, coordinate, and motivate individual team members without the benefit of formal rewards or punishments,” wrote

the authors.

Past studies have shown a positive correlation between leadership and group task coordination: Leaders are chosen based on how well they understand group goals, assign tasks, and build group trust. The researchers in this study went a step further, however, finding that empathy serves as the basis for these leadership skills.

“What we are saying is that social skills, group tasks, and developing others depends on empathy,” said Wolff. “Empathy helps you recognize patterns, organize tasks, and help develop others.”

Jan Verhage, executive director of the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capitol, says that may be the ultimate organizational payoff. “In our workplace, we listen to employees' needs,” says Verhage. “As we do that, they become stronger and their leadership emerges.”

—Gerald Burstyn

**Empathy served as
the basis for behaviors
that supported leadership
emergence, like
recognizing group
patterns and understand-
ing individual and
team perspectives.**



“It's National Secretary Week. Buy yourself some flowers and have them on your desk by 9:00 a.m.”