



The Power of Empathy

By Dr Trevor Bentley.

One of the most widely used definitions of empathy is – ‘to stand in another person’s shoes and see the world from their perspective’ – another is – ‘to understand and share the other’s feelings’. I don’t believe that either of these approaches is possible. We cannot actually see the world from anyone else’s perspective, we can only hold our own view. However, recognising that every other person has their own unique perspective on life, and will respond to their experiences in their own particular way, is a good starting point.

Attending the funeral of a close friend who had died relatively young, I was approached by an acquaintance offering their sympathies, ‘I’m so sorry I know exactly what you are going through’. I politely replied, ‘I don’t think you have any idea what I am going through’, and moved on.

We are each of us a mystery, not only to others, but also to ourselves. If we consider the question ‘who am I?’ we will get a glimpse of how complex, multifaceted and mysterious we are.

One way I can see myself is in the mirror of another person’s reactions and response to me. I truly meet myself at the point that I am in ‘contact’ with another. When we share with another person a mutual understanding of how we impact and are impacted by each other we experience empathy. The essence of empathic contact is the way that our humanity becomes one with the humanity of the other and we share a moment of deep understanding and connection.

‘...the more two people are able to relate empathically to each other, the more probable it is that the relationship between them will be successful and endure. Without empathic understanding, there is no closeness,...’(Staemmler, 2012, p2)

Empathy is a two-way dynamic process, rather than a one-way attempt to put ourselves in the other’s shoes. It is not possible to actually see and experience the world as another person does, but we can seek to understand something of their experience, by asking them to describe what they are noticing, thinking and feeling.

This two-way empathic process involves noticing how I am impacted by my contact with the other, and then sharing this experience with them so that they recognise the impact they are having on me. When a young child cries and the mother reacts by holding the child to provide comfort; the child experiences the mother’s reaction and is calmed. As the child is calmed, so is the mother. This is two-way empathy.

To know and understand ourselves, at least as much as we can, in any given moment, is an important part of this two-way empathetic dynamic; just as much as trying to know and understand the other. By paying attention to the child’s needs, the mother satisfies her own needs.

Knowing Self

Who am I?

Are my ideas of me, and my recollections of my experiences, and my history a way to see myself, or can I really see myself in the mirror of the others' reactions to me, when I am in contact with them?

In exploring these ideas with colleagues I have come to understand that we are each a multitude of selves, with each of these being representative of how the people we meet experience us.

Recently I chaired a meeting of the board of trustees of a charity I support. Including the board and the senior management team, there were 14 of us seated around the table. I am sure that each of the thirteen others experienced me, both during that meeting and over the time I have known them quite differently from each other. There were, in effect, 14 Trevors present in the room, including each of their versions, and my own version of me.

In this example, the members of the executive experienced me in the role I play in the charity – a shared context. So whilst the differences might not necessarily be significant, I would have been seen differently by each of them. This is partly because they experience me through the filters of their own life experiences, beliefs, assumptions and perspectives. In other words a highly personal and subjective knowing of me, and one that might be very close, or in fact very distant from how I see myself.

Knowing other

During the board meeting, described above, there were thirteen people present whom I 'know' to some extent; and my knowing grows as I have more contact with them over time and in different contexts and situations.

'What I find stimulating and inspiring is the fact that there is always something new to discover.' (Staemmler, 2012, p25)

Staemmler goes on to talk about 'the mystery' of the other person and how we attempt to unravel the mystery by opening ourselves to learning about the other. However, it can be easier to create our own 'image' of the other person. In holding tightly to this view we treat our sense of others as if it is fact, which can lead us to be dogmatic or judgemental of our experience of them. Opening myself to meeting and learning about the other offers the opportunity to loosen my attachment to my experience and to soften the effect of my life's filters.

Contact and Boundaries

Through knowing ourselves we can learn to know others

The inner self is what we know about ourselves, what we like and dislike and where we choose to set our boundaries of comfort and protection.

The outer self is what we reveal of ourselves to others

Establishing my personal boundaries somewhere between the inner and outer self is important when making contact with other people. It is partly an issue of my psychological safety



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by protecting myself from the threat of harm (such as feeling shame). It is also about taking the risk of discovering others and being discovered by them. In establishing my own boundaries I learn about what is important to me. From this position, I recognise that the people I am meeting are doing the same as I am in setting their own boundaries. Given that I may well set boundaries that are different from others', means being sensitive as I approach contact with people. I will not succeed in these relationships if I assume that their boundaries are like mine.

Through knowing others we learn about ourselves.

When I meet and make the first moves to discover the other person I will encounter our joint boundaries. These boundaries of protection and risk have been formulated and conditioned by my life's experiences and have become enshrined in my assumptions, beliefs and preferences. The same is usually true of the other person.

Perhaps the riskiest aspect of making contact with other people is to temporarily suspend my judgmental voice and to check out my assumptions. This is much easier to say than to do.

When I first meet people there is a general expectation that what we each believe to be social boundaries will be respected. The fact that these boundaries will differ according to each society or community can lead to much confusion and disruption. 'Cultural' differences do not only apply to different societies and countries. They tend to feature between different industry sectors and even departmentally within a single organisation. It is very easy to be socially clumsy when I don't know 'how things are done around here'. When what I expect in a particular system does not happen my first response is often one of being offended. This is mainly because my boundaries (what I expect) have been invaded, either accidentally or deliberately. Once again, it is important for me to check out what I and the other people are likely to expect. In other words, to try to establish where our respective boundaries lie.

Systems will establish through time and practice what is OK and what is not OK.

'The boundary where two systems meet I call the 'zone of contact'. It is in this zone that representatives of each system meet and 'suss out' the other. The zones of contact serve to

mask reality and provide a safe area for exploring the other, rather like two dogs sniffing each other, but not as explicitly. The aim is for each system to decide the basis on which it is safe to work with the other.

In most situations, the people involved in these initial meetings are not necessarily aware of the extent to which they carry their system with them. The more they carry the system the less space there is to be truly themselves. Within a relatively short time, the new growing relationship starts to get fixed, as each system discovers what is acceptable to the other and they settle into a way of being. The longer the period over which this happens the more difficult it becomes to change the increasingly fixed perceptions.' (Bentley, 2006, unpublished client report.)

In the process of building strong, long-term relationships, I face the need to recognise both the systemic boundaries within which I operate and the systemic boundaries in which the other operates. These are primarily organisational boundaries and secondarily, the wider environmental boundaries. These are usually physical, such as dress codes and office layouts, as well as psychological and behavioural.

Recognising and working within these boundaries rather than clashing with them is important to me in setting the scene for the developing relationship.

Of course, all contact takes place within a particular context and so when the context changes, the previous contact achieved with a person cannot be assumed to be the same in the new context.

The most common manifestation of this is when a business connection in the organisational setting changes into a social context. The contact will not be the same so the boundary levels need to be re-negotiated and established at a level appropriate for the new context. This is frequently misunderstood and leads to many difficult and sometimes embarrassing situations.

We are all different and we move (largely unconsciously) with different levels of confidence from one context to the next. As our willingness to meet at our boundaries has a lot to do with our self-esteem and confidence, and as our self-esteem and confidence change from one context to the next, our boundaries change accordingly.

When I meet people at our joint boundaries it is possible



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to share information about myself with them. This does not necessarily mean sharing intimate details about my personal life, my history or my experiences, although it might. What it does mean is sharing what I am thinking, imagining and feeling when I am in contact with them.

This process of self-disclosure involves my willingness to be vulnerable. It also requires me to be authentic, to really be myself. And here is the key to empathic contact.

What I try to remember when maintaining authentic contact is – to own my statements, to be as crisp and clear as I can, and to share what is happening for me in the present moment.

The choice to disclose what is happening for me depends firstly on my own level of awareness and then on whether or not it seems ‘appropriate’ to share this information at this moment. Choiceful sharing with awareness of what is happening for me may be all that is needed.

I was working in Istanbul facilitating a leadership programme for a consultancy company. Mid-afternoon of the second day, one of the participants shared openly with me (in the group) how, he hadn’t experienced me modelling what I was teaching, even though I had said I would do so. He shared how he had experienced me and he was quite critical of how, I hadn’t remembered his name, or taken up his offer of a tour of the office. He shared how I had interrupted his and the group process by stopping discussions, and a few other aspects of his experience. When he finished several people immediately responded to him telling him it wasn’t like that

for them. I stopped them and said that what he was saying was his experience of me and completely valid for him and that I wanted to reply from my feelings. Basically what I said as near as I can remember was:

‘When I hear you say this I am sad and disappointed with myself. I am also feeling some shame that I did not remember your name and name tags would help me to correct that.’ I told him I had let him down and I had let myself down. I became quite emotional and tearful (Something apparently Turkish men are afraid of). I said it was ironic that I should have just been talking about how heartfelt my values of being real were, even if I didn’t always deliver what people wanted. It struck me that it was possible his need was to be seen and appreciated by me. I then told him that I would never forget his name and that when he was ready I would go round the office with him. Another person then went and got some sticky labels and pens, and everyone wrote out name tags and stuck them on their shirt fronts.

Everyone was moved by this exchange and several people spoke before we sat silently for several minutes then the MD said, ‘I think this would be a good place to stop for today.’

The next day I arranged to meet my critic early so that he could show me round the office, and during this he told me that when I responded to him in the group he felt really heard and understood.

Working consciously with boundaries is a vital part of building strong long-term relationships. Knowing about my

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own boundaries and being sensitive, careful and respectful when approaching other people's boundaries will significantly enhance our connection.

Searching for Connection

When I meet someone I do not necessarily connect with them straight away. Something needs to happen that goes beyond the initial acknowledgement of each other. What enables us to connect is my movement towards the other, which is open to a movement of the other towards me. This connection is momentary and transitory and neither person lets go of a sense of self.

Being truly who I am, and at the same time being open to the other's perception and experience of me, is both challenging and exciting.

Safety and Boundaries

I make contact at the boundary between me and all that is not me. So when I make contact with others I also make contact with my environment through my senses; this can be seen as my physical boundary. Making contact with others can be both physical and emotional and if I don't feel safe in making contact I might avoid contact and pull back well behind my boundary. My physical boundary extends beyond my skin for a short distance, which I will call 'my personal space'. You might have experienced someone crossing this invisible boundary into your space and felt the urge to pull away.

The Impact of the Situation

Contact is an event that takes place in a particular context and a situation. For empathic contact to take place I have to pay attention to the other person and to what is happening. I have to be interested.

I can only be empathic towards a person and the subjective situation of a person to whom I am paying attention. (Staemmler, 2012, p178)

Each particular situation is different and unique, and every person will shape it in their own way. So the process of contact and connection is different every time, even on those occasions when the situation seems the same or similar to previous ones.

My perception of the other and what is happening is completely subjective and full of my own idiosyncratic meaning making processes, all of which could be way off the mark. Caution and care are called for in every moment of contact as I tentatively reveal myself and attempt to discover the other.

However empathically understanding we are, the other thus retains his mystery and simply remains irrevocably different. Yet at the same time, this also makes him familiar to us and similar, since who does not remain a mystery even to themselves – notwithstanding all self-searching and insight? Ultimately, it is not a question of unravelling the mystery of the other, but of allowing them to keep us awake and, for their sake, making ever new and deeper attempts to achieve; good enough' understanding. Then we pave the way for what really counts: human connection. (Staemmler, 2012, p256)

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Reference

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About the Author

Dr Trevor Bentley, now retired, worked as a leadership consultant and coach, and a group facilitator. He was a member, and Deputy Chair of the IMS, and Editor of the Management Services Handbook. He has written more than 30 books and numerous published articles on business and leadership.