

## Is empathy a skill that can be learned?

ARTICLE BY: Julia Atkinson, PCC, Senior Executive Coach, Facilitator and Consultant, credentialed member - International Coaching Federation | Published: 18 DECEMBER 2020



A WHILE BACK I WROTE AN ARTICLE ABOUT WHETHER PATIENCE IS A SKILL THAT CAN BE LEARNED AND HAD A LOT OF INTERESTING FEEDBACK FOR IT, BECAUSE IT'S A BURNING (LITERALLY, IN THE BELLY) TOPIC THAT LEADERS FEEL THEY SHOULD GET BETTER AT, OR HAVE MORE OF. ANOTHER RECURRING THEME IN CORPORATE COACHING – NO MATTER WHERE ON THE PLANET – IS EMPATHY.

It's one of my favorite topics. Thus I want to ask the question: **is empathy a skill that can be learned?** You should think so, seen there is so many books, trainings and podcasts out there talking about improving your EQ (Emotional Quotient) and dialing up your ability to walk in another person's shoes. As an ICF Professional Certified Coach, I have worked with both very empathetic leaders and ones with less consideration of impact on relationships. Both can be great leaders and have their place in an organization. Still, in order to **create engagement and inspire loyalty, empathy** seems to be **key**.

Working with the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator ® (MBTI ®)[1], I came to the conclusion that **empathy at least partly depends on personality type**. The 3<sup>rd</sup> letter in the typing F for feeling or T for thinking defines a lot (not all) of how empathetic a person is. Just a quick (high-level) reminder: The 3<sup>rd</sup> letter defines **how we make a decision** about information we receive: **Thinking** people use their **mental processing ability to make a decision based on logical analysis**. Some key words for **Thinking types** are: **head, objective, justice, cool, impersonal, critique, analyze, precise, principles**. **Feeling** people use their **mental processing to make a decision based on evaluating relative worth**.

Some key words for **Feeling types** are: **heart, subjective, harmony, caring, personal, appreciate, empathize, persuasive, values.**

So according to **MBTI**®, some people have a **natural preference** to just make decisions more based on logical analysis and some tend to base it more on evaluating its relative worth (how are relationships and people influenced by a decision). And using **MBTI**® we're talking about dichotomies, i.e. can **never happen at the same time**, because Feeling and Thinking are opposites, so one or the other. Although there is of course **different levels of these different characteristics**, if we think of Feeling and Thinking (and all the key words like heart – head etc.) as opposite ends of a scale. How these manifest is not only based on personality type, but **shaped by culture and environment.**

This is only giving a part of the picture, because the Feeling/Thinking is only about decision making and as said a natural preference. **MBTI**® also includes information on where we get energy (Extravert, Introvert) how we take information in (Sensing, iNtuition) and our attitude towards life (Perceiving, Judging). The **16 types** that result in the different letter combinations **each have distinct characteristics** with **different strengths** and **potential pitfalls** for each.

You probably guessed that 8 **Feeling** types are more **concerned with people and relationships** and the 8 **Thinking** types are more about **logic and analysis.**

The good news is that we all become better at using the 'other' preference when we get older.

**Empathy is a trait one can work on**, although it is as such more a natural tendency of being than a skill that can be learned. Which doesn't mean it can't be developed: You can learn to **use logic and analysis to deduct what impact your decisions and leadership style have on relationships.** You can learn to be **more personable** and **develop your curiosity** in learning more about people, **what motivates them** and enquire how people are, before you ask for something. You can **observe people's reactions** and **adjust your communication style.** You can learn to **focus on both appreciation and critique when you lead people.** The big question though is how difficult is it to learn, seen it's not your natural preference and does it show when you're under stress. Here's some things to try out:

#### ***Logic deduction of impact on relationships***

**Anticipate** what **impact** your business decisions have **on relationships** (your own and others). When you plan a reorganization for example, don't just consider what the **outcome is for productivity and efficiency**, but how will **people be impacted working together**, in different positions etc. **Talk to different peers and employees**, preferably some Feeling types and let them talk about **potential problems** as well as **opportunities** that come with your decisions. Find out **how your leadership style works for different people.** Seeking **open dialogue** will broaden your horizon and **help you to a more empathetic view.**

#### ***Develop your curiosity and be more personable***

When you **seek dialogue** and **ask preferably open questions** and decide to **listen** you'll learn a lot **about people** and **what motivates** them. **Suspend judgement** and be aware **of your biases**, we all have them. So **don't assume** what motivates people, what they think, how they feel etc. just **hone your curiosity** and **let them put these things into words.** Pick them up where they are coming from.

Keep an **open mind**, use silence as a tool to let people talk, even though that might feel uncomfortable for most. It's very likely that you **may hear something new** and

understand **different views** that can broaden your perspective. **Talk to different people** and be genuinely curious about them.

### ***Observe reactions and adjust communication style***

When you **observe actively how people** (that can be peers, employees, clients, bosses, anyone) **react** to your communication you can learn a lot. Above all people with a **direct communication style**, which is usually a combination of personality type and culture/ environment can **benefit** a lot **from analyzing reactions**, listening to feedback and then adjusting the way they talk or write. Try to **name your behavior that triggers reactions** in people and adjust it. This might be difficult, but **awareness is a great first step**.

**Ask for feedback** and indicate you're **open to it** without negative consequences. **Foster an atmosphere of trust** where people can give you feedback.

### ***Focus on appreciation as well as critique***

A Thinking person is usually **very good at spotting what is wrong** with a product or a process by having that inner critic. Critique is what makes them good at finding where it doesn't go right. So it's **not a bad way to be in an organization**. At the same time it's very **important to appreciate success** and **things well done**, as a lot of people thrive on that. It's literally what gets them out of bed in the morning. So actively looking for what is going well and right and saying it out loud is crucial for relationships.

And then there is this thing with **walking in another person's shoes**. A good starting point is **using your imagination**: think about what another person **feels**, is **going through**, what **motivates** them, etc. When you are at it, try to be **specific naming that emotion**. Is it anger, frustration, sadness, being stressed, tired... Try to understand **how others like to make decisions** and **take information in** and how they **like to communicate**. A very good question to ask yourself in this context is what **can you do to support this person**. If you can't come to a good answer, **ask them**.

In order to successfully **improve your empathy** and will probably **use a combination of the above strategies**. **Collect feedback** and **keep tweaking your communication style**, remember **it's a process** that will take time. **Under stress** you're likely to focus less on empathy and **revert back** to logic and head decisions, just be aware and **keep at it**. A **good tool** might be to find a buddy at work or a professional coach (the [Find a Coach](#) feature on the International Coaching Federation website is very helpful in that respect) **who can remind you** when you're not following through on the changes you want to make. Develop "leader as a coach" competence and **create an organizational culture of trust** where you foster empathy by **being curious and asking open questions** and **offer support** where it's needed. Find solace in the fact that we all **get better at using the non-preferred dichotomy the older we get**.

If you need support on your organisation's and leader's coaching journey, do contact us at ICF and our team of volunteers in the UK will be happy to help.

[www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)

[www.coachfederation.org.uk](http://www.coachfederation.org.uk)

[www.experiencecoaching.com](http://www.experiencecoaching.com)

[1] Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type – The original book behind the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) test–illustrated, 31. Mai 1995  
by Isabel Briggs Myers (Author), Peter B. Myers (Author)