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Texas McCombs

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Working Together is Easier if You Can Distinguish Perspective-Taking From Empathy

New research offers pointers on seeing a co-worker's point of view — knowing when to read their thoughts and when to read their feelings.

Based on the research of Natalie Longmire and David Harrison



As workplaces become increasingly diverse, employees may find that they often collaborate with people who are different from them.

To work together more effectively, employees are often advised to try putting themselves in their co-worker's shoes, sandals, or heels — a process that Texas McCombs doctoral student Natalie Longmire and Management Professor David Harrison call perspective-taking.

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In a workforce that's 35 percent minority and 47 percent women, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), "perspective-taking has been suggested as a tonic for overcoming differences like demographic diversity," Harrison says.

But it's not always the best approach, Longmire and Harrison find in new research. Analyzing and comparing 118 studies spanning 30 years, they discovered that seeing someone else's point of view can help in some work situations but hurt in others. Their results suggest ways to harness the benefits while avoiding the drawbacks.

The key is to recognize that thoughts are different from feelings, and seeing a co-worker's point of view is not the same as feeling their pain.

Thoughts Versus Emotions

As they looked at past studies, the researchers were struck by how many of them confused two different kinds of social skills: perspective-taking and empathy.

"Perspective-taking is cognitive," Harrison says. "It's about understanding someone else's thoughts and viewpoints. That's distinct from empathic concern, which is understanding what somebody else feels."

The difference might sound trivial, but it can have practical consequences, he says. In perspective-taking, "You imagine yourself as that other person, but it's really all inside your own head, and sometimes you might get it wrong."

Empathy, by contrast, pulls you out of your head and pushes you towards the other person. Because people are more open to collaborating when they feel understood, Longmire says, "It's an important social salve. Those who can feel it are helpful to have around in the workplace."

As the researchers re-examined the earlier studies, they separated out the two skills and their effects in the workplace, by measuring the overall degree of statistical correlation between them. Perspective-taking and empathy turned out to be largely separate, with their effects overlapping a mere 24 percent.

Competition and Cooperation

In competitive situations like negotiations, picturing the other person's perspective had the more positive impact. It improved the outcomes of the negotiations by 3 percent or more in terms of the value they capture (from splitting the pot of what's being negotiated). "Perspective-taking helps especially when you're trying to figure out ways to get more from the other person," Harrison says. "You can anticipate their moves."

Perspective-taking was also fruitful when bosses were working with employees, who might have different agendas.

"When you're the leader in a group, it's important to be able to take the perspective of your followers." —
Natalie Longmire.

By contrast, empathizing with the person across the table reduced one's own outcomes an average by 5 percent. Says Harrison, "You put yourself at a disadvantage if you're extending emotional support to your opposite."

Empathy was more useful when the goal was cooperation rather than competition. Considering another worker's feelings raised their willingness to collaborate by 29 percent.

The Dark Side of Seeing Their Side

Although both skills can be handy in the workplace, they also have their dark sides, the researchers found.

When relying on perspective-taking, workers risk becoming too Machiavellian, of going for a win-lose outcome rather than a win-win. “It helps you out, but it doesn’t necessarily help out the other person,” says Harrison.

Empathy backfires when a manager has to choose between employees, for rewards like promotions, bonuses, or raises. If a boss gets wrapped up in one worker’s feelings, Longmire warns, they can end up shortchanging the others.

In those cases, perspective-taking is the better choice, she adds. “It allows managers to hold multiple interests in mind and make fairer decisions.”

Learning to Look Through Another’s Eyes

Since each approach has strengths and weaknesses, the ideal is to be familiar with both. “It’s important to develop both of them separately, so that you can use one or the other in different situations,” says Longmire. “Fortunately, these are two skills that can be learned.”

A variety of training tools are available, she says. The most recent use virtual reality simulations to help people improve their interpersonal abilities. A worker can practice an encounter with a difficult co-worker or view a workplace experience through the eyes of someone of a different race or gender.

The bottom line is that both perspective-taking and empathy can help to build trust on the job, Harrison says.

“If you have trust, you can have a good fight. Yes, you’ll have disagreements, but you won’t feel awful after disagreements occur.” — David Harrison

Both techniques are especially valuable in today’s knowledge and service economy, where employees collaborate more than ever.

“Relationships have gotten more and more important for getting work done,” Harrison says. “Whatever things we can summon to help these relationships should help organizations.”

“Seeing their side versus feeling their pain: Differential consequences of perspective-taking and empathy at work” was published in August 2018 in the Journal of Applied Psychology.

Story by Steve Brooks

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