

The Signs of a Leader's Empathy Deficit Disorder

November 25, 2013 Daniel Goleman



Think of two people who work in your organization: one a level or two below you, and the other a level above. Now imagine getting an email from each of them. Ask yourself how long it would take you to answer those emails.

Chances are the one from above you respond to right away. And the one from below you are likely to answer when you can get around to it.

That difference in response times has been used to map the hierarchy in an organization. And it reflects a more general principle: we pay more attention to those who hold more power than we do – and notice less those who hold less power.

[The relationship between power and focus shows up starkly in interactions as simple as two strangers meeting for the first time.](#) In just five minutes of conversation, the person of higher social status generally gives fewer indicators of attention, like eye contact and nods than does the one who holds less social power. [This attention gap has even surfaced even among college students from wealthier and poorer families.](#)

That analysis of response times to email was done using the entire email database of Enron Corporation, which became available to researchers after it was used to investigate the firm's collapse. [The program for detecting the social networks in an organization through email analysis was developed at Columbia University, and proved remarkably accurate.](#)

When attention flows along power lines, empathy also takes a hit. When strangers told each other about divorces or other painful moments in their lives, there was more empathy expressed by the less powerful person. Another measure of empathy – the accuracy with which we can tell a person's feelings from clues like facial expression – also turns out to differ, with lower status people more skilled than those of higher positions.

This fact of social life poses a danger for leaders – after all, [the most effective leaders are outstanding at abilities that build on empathy](#), like [persuasion](#) and influence, [motivating](#) and [listening](#), [teamwork](#) and collaboration.

There are [three kinds of empathy](#). First, cognitive, where you sense how the other person thinks about the world, which means you can put what you have to say in terms they will understand. Second, emotional, where you instantly resonate with how the person feels. And third, empathic concern, where you express the ways you care about the person by helping with what you sense they need.

The signs of a leadership empathy deficit in any or all of these varieties can best be detected by how a leader's actions impact those he or she leads. Some of the common signs:

1. Directives or memos that make no sense to those receiving them are a sign that a boss does not understand how employees think about their world, and fails to tune in to the language that would make most sense to them. Another sign of low cognitive empathy: strategies, plans or [goals that make little sense or seem off-point to those who are to execute them](#).
2. Communiqués or, worse, commands, that upset those receiving them. This signifies a boss who doesn't accurately read the emotional reality of employees, and so seems clueless to those receiving them.
3. Expressing attitudes that seem cold or just out-of-touch with the issues employees struggle with signifies a lack of empathic concern. Feeling your boss doesn't care puts employees on the defensive, where [they are afraid to take risks like innovating](#).

Leaders at higher levels are perhaps most in danger of coming down with empathy deficit disorder, for a simple reason: as you rise through the ranks fewer and fewer people are candid with you, willing to give you frank feedback on how you seem to others.

Among the ways to prevent an empathy deficit might be joining what Harvard Business School's [Bill George](#) calls "[true north groups](#)," where you get honest feedback from people who know you well. Another might be creating an informal network of colleagues who will be frank with you (perhaps outside your organization) and staying in regular touch with them – or the same with trusted friends at all levels within your own firm.

High-contact leaders, who wander around and spend informal time getting to know employees, inoculate themselves against empathy deficit. The same goes for leaders who create a workplace atmosphere where people feel safe being candid – including with the boss.