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# Empathy in Leadership: Appropriate or Misplaced? An Empirical Study on a Topic that is Asking for Attention

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**Abstract** Leadership has become a more popular term than management, even though it is understood that both phenomena represent important organizational behaviors. This paper focuses on empathy in leadership, and presents the findings of a study conducted among business students over the course of 3 years. Finding that empathy consistently ranked lowest in the ratings, the researchers set out to discover the driving motives behind this invariable trend, and conducted a second study to obtain opinions about possible underlying factors. The paper presents the findings of both studies, as well as literature reviews on the differences between management and leadership, a historical overview of leadership, a reflection of 21st century leadership, the ongoing debate on the effects of corporate psychopaths on ethical performance, and scholars' perception on empathy in corporate leadership. The findings indicate the need for a paradigm shift in corporations as well as business schools in regards to leaders' required skills, and suggest a proactive approach from business faculty to change the current paradigm.

**Keywords** Empathy · Leadership · Emotional intelligence · Narcissism · Psychopaths · Servant leadership · Social skills

## Introduction

Leadership has become quite a buzzword in the past two decades. The number of books on Amazon.com with the word “leader” in the title has run up to a staggering 49,297, while ProQuest, one of the major databases for scholarly journals, reports a total of 13,657 scholarly papers on the subject of leadership. Many scholars perceive the term leadership as more distinctive than management. Whereas, in the not so far past, it was an honor to be called a manager, this perspective seems to have shifted in the opinions of these scholars, and leadership is “hot” while management is “not.” McCrimmon (2010) puts it this way: “Once there was a notion that managers could do it all. But the notion fell into disfavor when “leadership” - for example, the heroic leader - emerged and pushed managers aside and stripped them of their responsibilities” (p. 1). McCrimmon (2010) praises John Kotter’s opinion that leaders and managers are different, and points out that inspiring leaders influence people to change direction while inspiring managers motivate them to work harder” (p. 1). Yet, there are also scholars who feel that management and leadership should complement each other. Nienaber (2010) reviews the opposing views among scholars about these two phenomena, and finds that, indeed, a large number of scholars describe leadership as an exalted concept that is imperative to companies’ successes, whereas they ban management to the mundane corner of uninspiring and tactical activities. However, Nienaber (2010) also comments on those scholars who share a different stance by perceiving leadership and management as an integrated whole. Nienaber’s study finds that these two concepts are interwoven, but the divergence of opinions will probably linger for many years to come. McLean (2005) shares these findings and stresses, “Both activities are essential to

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enable objectives and strategies to be achieved, business activities and human resources to be managed, change to be effectively achieved, and projected profits and organizational success to be achieved” (p. 16).

As scholars and course facilitators of management and leadership courses, the authors of this paper have regularly engaged in class dialogues about the potential difference between leadership and management. Students in both undergraduate and graduate business courses, seem to be in agreement with the fact that leadership encompasses a greater scope of influence and guidance, entailing less detail orientation and more vision, while management focuses more on day-to-day implementations of pre-formulated guidelines. Most students also seem to agree that good leaders should be capable of proper management skills, while good managers should be able to lead when expected to. But while there is sufficient agreement on the basics, there still seems to be some crucial dust to be settled when it comes to the defining qualities of leaders in this day and age. While there is general consensus about qualities such as intelligence, charisma, responsibility, vision, and passion, there are some “softer,” more emotion-driven skills, such as compassion, and empathy, that have not been widely accepted as befitting leadership execution. Inspired by the findings of a multi-year study on leadership skills conducted among business students, this paper will focus on the trait of empathy in organizational leadership. “Empathy refers to one’s ability to understand the feelings transmitted through verbal and nonverbal messages, to provide emotional support to people when needed, and to understand the links between others’ emotions and behavior” (Polychroniou 2009, p. 345). First, a brief historical overview of leadership will be presented, followed by a deliberation on 21st century leadership. The paper will then discuss the findings of two studies on leadership skills, present literature findings that support or contest these findings, and end with conclusions and recommendations based on both sources.

### Leadership: A Brief Overview

It has been about a century now since the concept of leadership was first formulated and analyzed in a theory. The earliest theories on this phenomenon focused more on the leader than on the context in which he or she performed. In the last half of the nineteenth century, researchers assumed that leadership traits were immutable properties, ingrained in the future leader from birth on (Zaccaro 2007). Vroom and Jago (2007) refer to this as “the *heroic* conception of leadership” (p. 18).

Because the study to be discussed in this paper pertains to qualities of leaders, it can be asserted that the leadership trait paradigm was prominent in this study. In their explanation of the trait theory of leadership, House and Aditya (1997) assert, “A large number of personal characteristics [are] investigated such as gender, height, physical energy and appearance as well as psychological traits and motives such as authoritarianism, intelligence, need for achievement, and need for power” (p. 410). It needs to be clarified that in this study, the emphasis was not on physical traits, but more on psychological traits and motives desired in leaders.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the realization emerged that leadership traits were not inborn, but that they included all relatively enduring qualities that distinguished leaders from non-leaders: the leader behavior paradigm, sometimes also referred to as a style approach, surfaced. “The initial guiding assumption of the behavioral paradigm [is] that there are some universally effective leader behaviors” (House and Aditya 1997, p. 421).

As time, studies, and awareness progressed, the trait and style approach did not remain the only theories through which leadership was defined. Avolio (2007) points out that contingency theories emerged when conflicting results were noted from examining the link between the traditional leadership traits and performance. In his historical overview, Avolio (2007) lists some of the established contingency models of leadership, such as “Fiedler’s (1967) trait contingency model, Vroom and Yetton’s (1973) normative contingency model, House and Mitchell’s (1974) path–goal theory, and Hersey and Blanchard’s (1969) situational theory” (p. 26). According to Avolio, all these styles link leadership to specific contextual demands, resulting in better performance outcomes. Northouse (2004), who also wrote extensively on the topic of leadership, elaborates as follows on the situational theory: “The basic premise of the [situational] theory is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership” (p. 87). The influence of situational theories will become more apparent when the topic of empathy will be reviewed in a later section of this paper.

There are numerous definitions of leadership. Most sources consider it to be an interaction between the leaders and others. Vroom and Jago (2007), for instance, describe leadership as a process of motivating others to work together collaboratively to accomplish great things. In this definition, Vroom and Jago capture leadership as a process that involves influencing or motivating but does not have pre-defined rewards established. Rather, they consider the main result of a leader–follower interaction to be the pursuit of a common goal. The outcomes of the leader–follower collaboration can be experienced differently by all constituencies.

## Leadership in the 21st Century

Against the backdrop of major political, economic, and social changes, some encouraging and others worrisome, the topic of leadership has become even more appealing, not so much anymore as a theory, but rather as a pragmatic need toward improvement of the quality of an ever increasing pace and complexity of life. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners get confronted with the criticism that there is a mismatch between the two fields in which leadership is considered essential: some critics point out that educational institutions fail to help develop the right skills and traits in upcoming business leaders, while others stress that corporations fail to adopt leadership strategies that make sense in today's changed world of work.

There are numerous solid pieces of advice to those who aspire leadership positions in the 21st century, such as Allio's (2009) big five ideas, which he feels are the main concepts captured throughout all leadership books out there. These five ideas are: (1) Good leaders have good character—they need to be competent and ethical; (2) There's no best way to lead—today's circumstances are constantly changing, requiring many different ways of leading; (3) Leaders must collaborate—decision making and conflict resolution need to happen with inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible; (4) Adaptability makes longevity possible—only leaders who can lead their organizations through repeated changes will succeed; and (5) Leaders are self-made—while they can learn theories and principles, it's usually the experience in real life that makes or breaks leaders.

Hopen (2010) also reflects on the changes that leadership has witnessed in recent years. Asserting that much of the leadership strategies in the twentieth century were extensions to Max Weber's bureaucracy theory, where dominance and authority were the key elements, Hopen underscores that the 21st century brings a whole new set of demands, which radically change the way leaders will perform. She thereby mentions:

- (a) The dazzling pace of changes in technology, which affect products, services, and leadership;
- (b) The unstoppable trend of globalization which affects all entities, whether performing locally, nationally or internationally, because today's customer can be everywhere and still reach us through the many communication means available. This, too, requires a different way of leading;
- (c) Knowledge workers: a term coined by management scholar Peter Drucker that has now become everyday reality: today's workforce members are more educated and possess crucial skills that are valuable to

any leader. This calls for more integration and participation in leading;

- (d) The composition of the workforce: diversity is no longer a phenomenon of metropolitan areas only. It can be seen all around us. It is reflected in all stakeholders, and requires adaptable leadership;
- (e) Social responsibility: companies can no longer ignore this concept, because it becomes increasingly ingrained in rules and regulations, and it significantly affects the way customers look at the organization;
- (f) Partnerships: in this regard, Hopen cites management thinker Marshall Goldsmith, who has conducted a study and found that near-future leaders will have no choice but to establish partnerships within and outside their organizations.

The multiple dimensions in leadership qualities as presented by Allio (2009), combined with Hopen's (2010) list of complexities in today's performance environments for leaders form a fertile foundation to review a critical leadership quality that has thus far encountered resistance in being accepted in both business education and business performance: empathy.

## Leadership Expectations: A Study

In this section the authors will discuss the results of two consecutive studies on the topic of empathy in leadership. The first study was the foundational research, executed in a survey format. The second study was developed as a result of the findings from the first study, and served to obtain a broad number of opinions from a different group of individuals about the outcome of the first study. Both studies will be discussed here below.

### The First Study: A Survey on Leadership Qualities

Over the course of five semesters, spread over 3 years, starting in spring 2008 and ending in fall, 2010, the authors conducted a study in a recurring upper-division undergraduate university business course titled "Leadership Theory and Practice." The students in this course vary widely in age, and life/work experience, as the course is offered in traditional as well as non-traditional formats. Being situated in Los Angeles, the students also represented a great degree of ethnic and cultural diversity. Given the fact that the audience in these classes was so diverse, it becomes even more interesting that there was such consistency in the findings. In total, 87 students participated in this study ( $n = 87$ ).

The study was conducted as a simple survey: on-location, during a class session, which ensured a 100% response rate.

*Research Question*

The research question formulated as a foundation to this study was rather straightforward:

- What qualities are essential to be an effective leader (on a scale of 1 (least important) to 10 (most important))?

*Method of Data Collection*

Given the fact that the study was conducted on a small campus that prides itself in small classes where student–professor ratios are attractive, the total number of study participants over the course of 3 years was only 87. The classes varied from 9 (smallest) to 26 (largest).

The students were handed sheets on which they could list the qualities they considered essential for leaders’ effectiveness. The study was anonymous, in that names were not to be placed on the sheets.

Once the sheets were filled out, they were collected, and the data was inserted in a database, where it was stored for compilation purposes.

*Data Analysis and Classification*

After each class a quick analysis was made of the data gathered, and this is where the interesting fact started to emerge: some qualities consistently ended up as top requirements for effective leadership, while others consistently ended at the bottom of the ranking.

Once the last survey was conducted, the data were compiled in one comprehensive figure, which included a table with the average scores on leadership qualities for the 5 courses (see Fig. 1).

For readers’ clarity, the data were quoted in importance on a scale from 1 to 10, to attain a more consolidated overview of the findings. The result is depicted in Fig. 2.

The Second Study: A Collection of Opinions on Empathy as a Leadership Quality

In the fall semester of 2010, after the analysis of the study described above and the confrontation with the consistent pattern of empathy being ranked lowest as a leadership

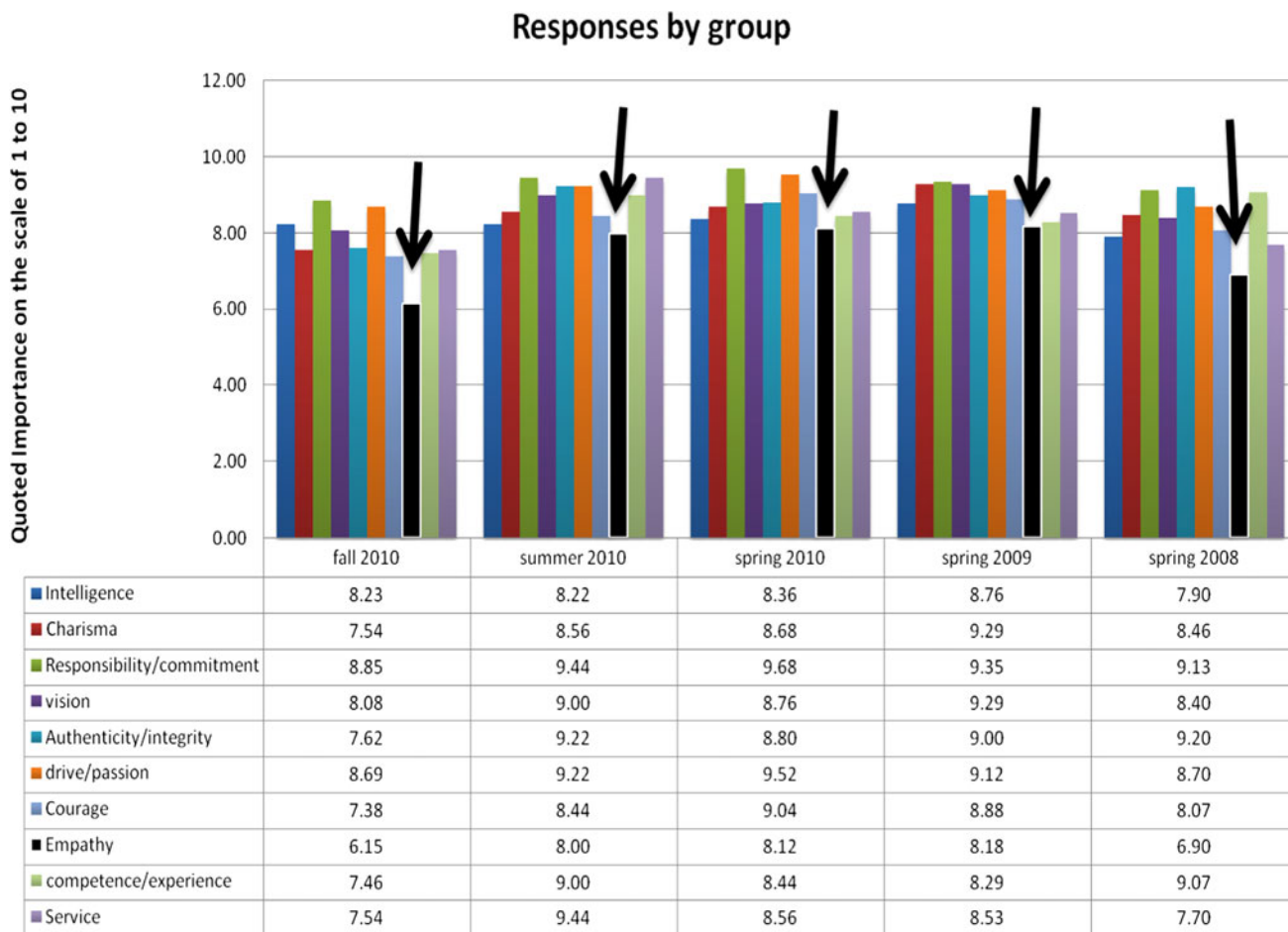
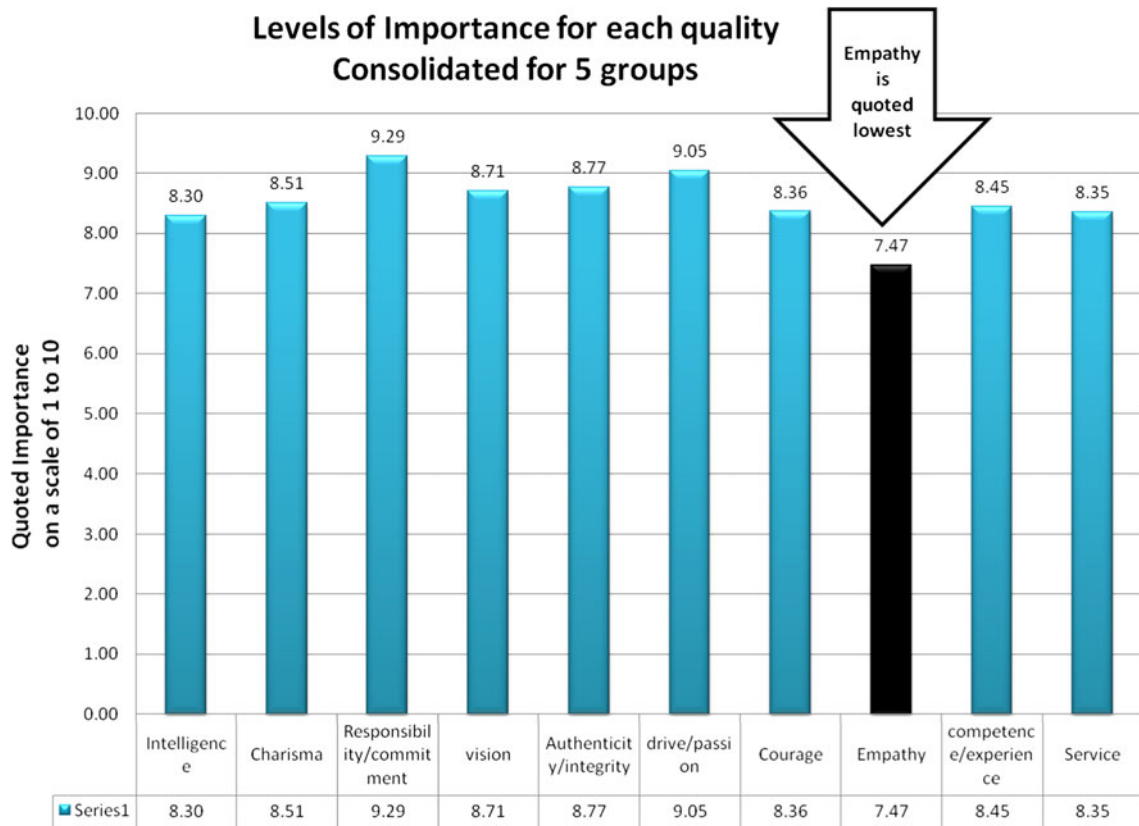


Fig. 1 Average scores on leadership qualities



**Fig. 2** Leadership qualities presented on a scale of 1 to 10

quality, the authors conducted a second study, this time amongst students in two MBA courses. The courses were non-traditional, which entails that the participants were predominantly working adults.

*Research Question*

The execution of this study was rather straightforward as well. We briefly explained the previous study findings, then presented the following question:

- Why do you think empathy was considered least important among the 10 leadership qualities presented?

*Method of Data Collection*

A total of 35 MBA students/workforce members provided their insights on possible reasons why empathy was consistently ranked lowest in the previous leadership study. Like the first study, this one was conducted as a simple survey as well: on-location, during a class session, which ensured a 100% response rate. The students were handed sheets on which they could list the reason they considered to be at the foundation of the low ranking of empathy as a leadership quality. The study was also anonymous: no

names were placed on the sheets to enhance freedom in opinion expression.

*Thematic Analyses for MBA Responses*

The researchers went through each response, reading it and making in-depth notes to themselves. The coding began as goal-free. As an emerging process, being led by the data from one response to the next, this technique allowed the researches to improvise on the early findings in the data and develop the codes, or what later transpired as the themes, reflexively.

The first step was to obtain a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning. As a result of this process, the authors probed more deeply into the data, so as to be perspicuous of its complexity, in order to characterize it more precisely. The developing concepts based on the emerging codes and categories within each of the responses became the focus of further analysis. The researchers clustered together similar topics and took this list back to the original sources, abbreviated the topics as codes and marked the appropriate segments in respondents' comments as codes.

After comparing and analyzing the notes taken on the first few responses, the researchers agreed on the



preliminary list of topics to be identified throughout the manuscripts. They then applied the codes to the comments and ensured that the codes were not duplicated. Further coding proceeded as goal-directed, labeling the rest of the responses with the codes agreed upon.

#### *Inter-Rater Reliability*

Due to the fact that the second study involved perceptions from a number of study participants on a single phenomenon, oftentimes presented in more than one simple phrase, the researchers realized that it would strengthen the study to separately review and analyze the data, in order to measure whether there was common understanding. Inter-rater reliability was established by each of the researchers through re-reading the available data multiple times and verifying her original coding, trying to be aware of their own biases. Each coder went back and forth between the data and the coding to understand the nuance of the language in each source. The authors believe that this constant assessment of data within each source, between the sources, between developing codes, and between the codes and the sources data, insured a solid level of inter-rater reliability. The researchers attained an inter-rater reliability degree in 33 of the 35 submitted opinions, equaling an inter-rater reliability score of 94%.

Once inter-rater reliability was established through code/topic comparisons, the researchers proceeded with analytical coding, where themes were patterned into categories. The authors arrayed the codes by category to determine the properties and dimensions of each theme, searching for critical defining characteristics in each one. This approach was used until all available responses were accounted for in the analyses, discarded as non-germane, or moved to another category where they were more congruent with the meaning under development. The themes were discerned through discussion between co-researchers. As the result of the process of data reduction, the researchers arrived at the thematic divisions.

The following eight codes, or reasons why empathy may not be considered important in leaders, were identified:

1. Empathy interferes with (rational and ethical) decision making
2. Empathy may be perceived as a sign of weakness
3. Too little life/work experience to recognize empathy as a powerful leadership tool in action
4. Respondents (wrongly) tend to disassociate business from the human component
5. Misunderstanding the meaning of empathy for “pity”, which is dehumanizing
6. Empathy is fleeting/situational, while other qualities are stable

7. Historical lack of references/illustrations/visibility and discussion of empathy
8. Respondents lack empathy themselves

These codes were further consolidated in the following two major themes:

1. Respondents believe that empathy is inappropriate in business settings (codes 1, 2, 4).
2. Respondents have a lack of familiarity with empathy (codes 3, 5, 6, 7, 8).

#### **Empathy as a Leadership Quality: A Literature-Based Reflection**

Empathy has been discussed in a broad variety of business literature, specifically leadership literature, in recent years, and there is good reason for that.

##### Concerning Facts About Business Students

Research has so far demonstrated that business students and business leaders seem to have lower degrees of empathy. Brown et al. (2010), for instance, assert that there are multiple studies reporting that business students are more focused on self-interest than students in other fields. Brown et al. (2010) found that empathetic and narcissistic personality traits were significant predictors in ethical decision making. They further noticed that, of all business areas, finance students were least empathetic and most narcissistic. Brown et al. paint a grim picture of business students: they cheat more (holding the record with a 50% higher rate of reported cheating than any other major), are less cooperative, more likely to conceal instructors’ mistakes, less willing to yield and more likely to defect in bargaining games. Brown et al. assert that the mentality of unethical and narcissistic behavior follows business students into their professional careers, leading to the immoral organizational patterns we have come to know so well in recent years. They feel that business schools are still focusing too much on academic and social skill sets that will help students succeed in a competitive world, and too little on inter-human or “softer” skills.

##### Concerning Facts About Business Leaders

Supporting Brown et al.’s assertions about the transition of narcissistic tendencies from business schools to business organizations, Pepper (2005) reveals a concerning fact about narcissism in business leaders. While this quality is often sought in corporate leaders, because the right dosage

of narcissism can lead to optimal innovation, there is often only a thin line that distinguishes brilliant thinking narcissists, such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey and Jack Welch, who are also charismatic and visionary, from psychopaths such as Bernie Ebbers and Dennis Koslowski, who use their skills in harmful ways that we have all come to witness in recent years. Andrews and Furniss (2009) take it a step further and link excessive narcissism in business organizations to psychopathic behavior. They assert that, perfectly matching to the description of a psychopath, these business executives are superficially charming, grandiose, deceitful, remorseless, void of empathy, irresponsible, impulsive, lacking goals, poor in behavioral controls, and antisocial. Andrews and Furniss express concern about the fact that the business environment seems to be such fertile ground for psychopaths. According to Andrews and Furniss the psychopaths in business are highly attracted to transitional organizations that offer rewards and a stimulating environment, and are very cunning in entering these organizations. They first present themselves as ideal workers, then start building relationships with people who have formal and informal power, and ultimately manipulate the entire environment. Andrews and Furniss (2009) further affirm that the widely accepted model of democratic capitalism and modern days' business culture endorses and even promotes the behaviors of psychopaths.

#### A Closer Look at the Problem of Corporate Leaders Without Empathy

The debate on ethics and leadership without empathy has been very vivid in the past decade or two. Hare (1994) described psychopaths in professional settings and mentioned behavioral traits such as shallow, egocentric, grandiose, without guilt or empathy, and highly manipulative, with poor self-control, need for excitement and lack of responsibility as typical for these individuals. Babiak (1995) also alerted us early on that psychopaths were usually discussed in health or crime settings, but not in organizational performance. Babiak (1995) managed to defy prior assertions that psychopaths are relatively unsuccessful, by analyzing their behavior in organizational settings and concluding that they shrewdly prey onto organizational change circumstances—which we have on an ongoing basis these days—and play opposing parties against one another to their own advancement. Almost a decade after this article, Babiak and Hare (2006) published a book on the topic, warning about the manifestation, performance, and success levels of psychopaths in organizational settings. A phenomenon beyond everyday workplace politics, these psychopaths in suits cunningly transform the organizational environment into an arena where useful targets are meticulously identified and

cultivated, influential victims astutely controlled, and useless ones smartly abandoned in a well-developed system of hiring, promoting, succeeding, and firing. In line with Babiak's (1995) findings, Clarke (2005) also emphasizes the fact that psychopaths can be very successful in many work settings. He mentions examples of employment areas such as medicine, law enforcements, stock exchange, schools, universities, sales, advertising, and construction, and underscores that most of the time they perform unchallenged in their workplaces, while they can cause devastation to their victims and possibly bring the entire organization in which they work down. Because they form about 1 to 3 percent of the adult male population, and ½ to 1 percent of the adult female population, it is rather likely that we all encounter at least one psychopath in our work-life, according to Clarke (2005). Board and Fritzon (2005) also studied the presence of psychopaths in the workplace and underscored the grim picture that Babiak and Hare painted earlier. They found that many of the characteristics attributed to success in senior management roles were similar to those described as personality disorders (PDs), specifically of the "emotional components of psychopathic PD" (p. 17).

The influence of psychopaths on corporations is studied from external and internal angles. Ketola (2006), for instance, provides a serious point to ponder by linking organization's Corporate Responsibility behavior to the presence or absence of psychopaths at their helm. Some companies, asserts Ketola, are averse to taking any CR, and those obviously need to be awakened from their 100-year irresponsibility sleep by a prince of virtue (Ketola, 2006). As an example of the internal review of this issue: Boddy (2010), intrigued by the multiple assertions on corporate psychopaths and their negative effects on organizational performance, engaged in a major study in Australian workplaces, utilizing a measuring device to detect whether psychopaths were present in the workplaces he studied, and what their effects were on the climate. Boddy (2010) found that 88% of the workers involved in environments where psychopaths were present, suffered from work difficulties caused by human-caused disruptions, compared to 75.1% in environments where there were no psychopaths. The trend was consistent among all areas of research: perceptions of inadequate training were around 20% (65.8 vs. 47%) higher in environments with psychopaths, and problems due to lack of information were 14% more frequent (83.8 vs. 69.6%) in workplaces where psychopaths were present. Similar discrepancies were found in areas such as lack of support and incorrect instructions. Furthering the findings on the above-mentioned study, Boddy et al. (2010) posit that corporate psychopaths sort significantly negative effects internally and externally in the organizations in which they are involved. Their behavior



affects employee commitment as well as the organizations' corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance.

When Corporate Psychopaths are present in leadership positions within organizations, employees are less likely to agree with views that: the organization does business in a socially desirable manner; does business in an environmentally friendly manner and that the organization does business in a way that benefits the local community. (Boddy et al. 2010, p. 1)

In addition to the above, employees will feel less involved, appreciated, or rewarded (Boddy et al. 2010).

In spite of all their concerning traits and the suffering they cause among co-workers, psychopaths often seem to be embraced in corporate environments. Pech and Slade (2007) analyzed the reasons for this occurrence, and suggested that it may be because the very nature of business with its often excessive focus on the bottom line rewards and reinforces the typical narcissistic, self-centered, greed-based and guilt-deprived mentality of psychopaths. Stout (2005) also engaged in analysis of the manifestation of people with an excessive dose of self-centeredness and a lack of empathy or guilt, but approached her review from a broader angle. Referring to these ruthless and fundamentally flawed but brilliant and charming manipulators as sociopaths, Stout (2005) brings the entire societal fabric into the picture. She asserts that culture may have a lot to do with the nurturing or repression of sociopaths. She found, for instance, that some East Asian countries, where the culture is predominantly group centered, have a rather small percentage of sociopaths (0.03 percent), while Western cultures such as the US, which strongly reinforce an individualistic sense of behaving, harbor more than 100 times more (4 percent) of these dangerous characters.

The concerning factor in this all is that psychopaths don't like criticism and will maneuver business ventures into high risk situations. Since they are not the nurturing kind, they alienate devoted employees and jeopardize the company's chances on proper succession and long term well being.

### Why Empathy Makes Sense in Leadership

The above study findings present a bleak image of the business world and raise serious questions about the validity and reliability of business leaders. The disclosures about corporate psychopaths or sociopaths above should not only be considered in light of what is wrong with today's corporate world, but even more in light of the stance taken in this paper to accept and cultivate empathy as a serious leadership skill from here onward. The various study findings presented in the section above serve as

foundations for better understanding and illustration of the fact that empathy in leadership is highly appropriate, and that the issue needs to be taken serious by anyone who wants to prevent further manifestations of unethical and repressive business practices. The suggestion to incorporate more responsible qualities such as empathy in organizational leadership has been offered before. There has been quite some insight accumulated so far about the do's and don'ts of leadership. On a regular basis, scholars are keeping readers updated on the elements that determine good leadership in contemporary times, and empathy seems to be a frequently recurring theme. Mostovicz et al. (2009), for instance, remind us that leadership is a developmental process that involves thorough reflection, making choices, and "total commitment to the perpetual process of purpose seeking" (p. 571). Mostovicz et al. underscore empathy and ethical behavior as a crucial focus points for leaders, requiring continuous effort. Ciulla (2010) concurs that leaders should exert empathy and sensitivity, along with moral solidarity, commitment, concern, and physical presence, especially during or after crises. Ciulla stresses that leaders have a duty to care, and that this duty can be taught. Schilling (2010) draws a particularly interesting conclusion from a study on some great twentieth century leaders, being John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Mikhail Gorbachev, Nelson Mandela, and Lech Walesa. Schilling finds that, while these leaders are often labeled as charismatic leaders, their levels of empathy, emotional intelligence, commitment, inspirational motivation, and trustworthiness were foundational in making them the remarkable individuals they became.

"Empathy and social skills involve one's ability to perceive others' emotions, feelings, and needs and help others to regulate their emotions to achieve desirable goals" (Polychroniou 2009, p. 345). In spite of Polychroniou's assertions, Karnes (2009) confirms that "empathy and social skills are under trained and under developed by organizations" (p. 189), and explains the downward spiral-effect that starts with leadership void of emotional intelligence, leading to less empathy and social skills overall in organizations, expressed through employer-employee abuse, and ending in growing employee discontentment and all its consequences. Considering the challenges of the fast-paced contemporary organizational environment, Mill Chalmers (2010) draws the interesting conclusion that there should be a positive correlation between hard demands and soft skills. "The 'faster' the workplace the more essential it is to inspirational leadership with emotional intelligence and an empathy and understanding of the development needs of their staff" (Mill Chalmers 2010, p. 270). In support of Karnes' earlier assertion, Mill Chalmers presents an upward spiral-effect that starts with leaders who are willing to create an empowering, vision

building climate, resulting in motivated, healthy, well-performing employees, and consequently leading to improved bottom line figures. Expanding on Mill Chalmers' findings, Taylor (2010) adds that modern leaders need to engage in "21st century enlightenment", thereby not just responding to modern values, but shaping them. Taylor (2010) reviews the ideology of possessive individualism that has become synonymous with consumer capitalism and democracy, and draws the conclusion that the 21st century has presented us with a challenge of the individualistic based mindset for autonomy, and points us in the direction of empathic universalism, whereby we "have a relationship with our reactions rather than being captive of them" (p. 20).

Tom McDonald, doctor in Psychology, feels that empathy is important in contemporary leadership. He stresses, "What are the loving behaviors effective leaders need to develop to have this kind of impact on-the-job? They must show empathy, attunement, organizational awareness, influence, interest in developing others, inspiration, and teamwork" (McDonald 2008, par. 3). It is McDonald's opinion that we, human beings, are hard wired to be more spiritual in nature and connect to others, with the probable exception of the 1% of the total population who are psychopaths. He believes that we have entered an era where "survival of the nicest" will be the rule. McDonald (2008) underscores that altruistic behavior instigates a sense of mutuality, and that effective leaders display the qualities he mentioned above in their workplaces. In addition he mentions that these "soft" behaviors lead to hard results in business, and should therefore not be underestimated.

Donaldson (2008) seconds McDonald's assertions as he underscores that business leaders will have "to increase their knowledge and understanding of the changing international scene and the inter-relationship between business, society and the environment" (par. 1). He thereby points out that a broader definition of corporate success is at stake these days, in which understanding of diversity, and a long-term view on the consequences of decisions for societies, environments, and livelihoods, are key. Among the specific qualities of the new global business leader, Donaldson (2008) lists qualities such as clear vision (to deal with increased uncertainty), empathy (to interact with a wide variety of stakeholders), and humility (to admit mistakes, and deviate from the damaging consequences of arrogance). Washington et al. (2006) bring the popular theory of "servant leadership" in scope, and find that empathy is a crucial factor in this leadership style.

### *Empathy Can be developed*

Yet, while empathy seems to be on the rise as a recognized leadership prerequisite, other sources warn that this quality

takes time to develop. A 2006 study from the UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience found that young people are less capable of empathy-based emotions than more mature ones. The study, which was conducted by University College London, and presented at a British Association for the Advancement of Science festival at the University of East Anglia, concluded that the medial prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that is "associated with higher-level thinking, empathy, guilt and understanding other people's motivations - is often under-used in the decision-making process of teenagers" (*Blame it on the Brain* 2006, p. 16). The study further reveals that the maturity process brings about a shift in brain use from the back part to the front, which is where the "soft behaviors", as McDonald earlier labeled them, are triggered.

Based on the awareness that empathy and other soft behaviors are gaining leadership ground, companies are now deliberately looking for these qualities in hiring and promotion processes. Weinstein (2009) reports that empathy-based behaviors can be learned. "Individuals can be taught to ask questions to enhance understanding that builds connection between people and helps them to perceive the emotions of others" (p. 21). Various courses and instruments are being developed and tested in this regard. Investments from companies in these training sessions and devices have delivered encouraging results so far, according to Weinstein (2009).

In support of Weinstein's assertions above, Eriksen (2009) introduces a process that helps students to develop self-awareness, which kindles authenticity and leadership effectiveness. "This facilitation of the development of students' personal leadership principles is accomplished by having students first identify and clarify their values and beliefs and to consider the impact of these on their day-to-day organizational lives and leadership" (Eriksen 2009, p. 747). Izenberg (2007) has also found that qualities such as empathy, optimism and resilience can be taught in the classroom. Not everyone agrees with the fact that teaching these skills can actually be considered teaching. Some consider it therapy, and argue that teachers of these soft skills should be certified. Other sources even criticize the entire effort and feel that teaching these skills in the classroom takes away time that could be devoted to basic literacy and numeracy. However, there seems to be an upsurge in those who claim that common sense and moral judgment should be reintroduced in the classroom, and that these values could easily be embedded in existing curricula. Several other scholars support the notion that empathy can be developed, but refer to alternative strategies. Devay (2010) mentions religious and spiritual practices, with a special emphasis on meditation, while Mahsud et al. (2010) suggest management development programs and executive coaching as effective ways to cultivate this emotion.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The above literature-based reflections have presented a clear message: empathy is an essential aspect of 21st century leadership and can no longer be ignored if we want to prevent continuation of ethical disasters in the business world. The study presented in this paper has revealed a concern that many of the literature sources also noted: there is still a leading paradigm among business corporations that leaders should be narcissistic in order to successfully maneuver through the increasingly competitive corporate waters. As an immediate consequence, this disparaging paradigm still resonates in business schools, where the development of future leaders takes place.

On the bright side, the literature-based reflections also disclosed that empathy, although naturally developed through brain maturity, can be taught through formal and informal education, and in various environments.

The above-presented study has revealed the need for business educators to focus more on empathy and other “soft” skills, which can easily be included in the existing curricula. The undergraduate students that participated in the survey, which delivered the low rankings for empathy, were mainly young adults, varying in age from 21 to 30 years. It can therefore be assumed that their empathetic thinking process has not fully evolved to maturity. Yet, waiting until this spontaneously happens is not an option. Waiting until the corporate world sends a signal for a paradigm change to business schools is not a valid *modus operandi* either. Scholars will have to be proactive in this matter, and approach this problem as members of society and not only as educators. Simple reflection and review of business practices in the past decade should serve as a guiding motive for trend amendment.

The authors of this paper therefore recommend duplication of this study among students in other business schools, in order to find out whether any perceptual changes occur. In addition, the authors recommend that business school faculty, especially those teaching management and leadership courses, should make a concerted effort in infusing greater awareness into their students on the urgency and importance of empathy in leaders.

The business community is a powerful one in that business enters where no government or non-governmental entity does. As one of the most influential global constituents, it is important that the right attitude is displayed for the sake of future generations and for a restored equilibrium in the quality of life amongst members of the human race.

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