

Confidence, Vulnerability, and Empathy: Friends to Managers

Dr. David E. Bartz

Professor Emeritus

Department of Educational Leadership

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Avenue, Charleston, IL 61920 USA

Dallas T. Bartz, Juris Doctor

Dickson, Francissen, & Bartz, LLP

200 W. Galena Blvd., Suite 209, Aurora, IL 60506 USA

Abstract

Managers need to constantly assess their attributes and skill sets in relation to the responsibilities and expectations of their present position and for career development. Confidence, vulnerability, and empathy are three key attributes for success on the present job for managers and their career development. Confidence is represented by managers' skills in creating a sense of presence, making decisions with convictions, being influential, taking calculated risks, and challenging themselves to be the best. Vulnerability means that managers are exposing their uncertainties and taking emotional risks. Vulnerability is shown when a manager displays openness to input and feedback from staff and others, even if such information is critical of the manager's opinions or actions. Empathy is a manager's skill set for sensing and relating to the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and general situations of staff and colleagues—and recognizing and addressing their concerns—when they are experiencing emotional difficulties or challenges. Effective implementation of confidence, vulnerability, and empathy will significantly enhance the work environment for the manager, staff, and other stakeholders. These three attributes will also positively affect the manager's future regarding career development and promotions.

Keywords: confidence, vulnerability, empathy, managers' effectiveness

1.0 Introduction

The extent to which managers develop and exude confidence is key to establishing credibility with staff members, super ordinates, and other key stakeholders. Confidence allows managers to “open up” with others in the work environment by authentically portraying that they do not have the right answer for every situation or the solution for every problem. Confidence allows managers to show their vulnerabilities. This sharing also prompts staff and others to be more open with the manager and furnish honest, creative, and innovative input.

Confidence creates a platform from which managers can be secure in being empathetic with staff members and colleagues when such situations arise. Effective use of empathy by managers benefits those to whom it is applied, contributes to making the work environment more productive, and fosters a positive bond and important social connection between the manager and others in the workplace. The result is a more effective working relationship that enhances productivity for all.

2.0 Confidence

Confidence is the cornerstone of leadership. You can teach a leader many other fundamentals of leadership. Without leaders first believing in oneself, true leadership will exist only in title. A leader that is technically qualified for the position, but lacks confidence, will find it difficult to lead others (Stark, 2012, p.1).

Confidence is represented by managers' skills in: (a) creating a sense of presence, (b) making decisions with convictions, (c) being influential, (d) taking calculated risks, and (e) challenging oneself to be their best.

Confident managers understand the importance of accurately assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and surrounding themselves with staff members that are more competent than they are in their areas of weakness.

A confident manager exudes and emulates empowerment, empathy, passion, and vision (Rogers, 2012). Managers' self-esteem and confidence go hand-in-hand. Managers need to use positive "self-talk" to build confidence and overcome fear. Managers who are confident have no need to be overly aggressive in order to accomplish goals because they have trust in the capabilities of themselves and their staff members. Nor do they need to present a persona of a "know it all" because of their insecurities. There is a natural tendency for staff members to trust and support managers that exude confidence (Stark, 2012). As the Centre for Lifelong Learning (2017) notes, "Confident leaders build trust and optimism about the future, and people thrive on that kind of positive emotion" (p. 1).

Managers often build confidence through making mistakes and learning how to recover from them. Confidence allow managers to take on tasks and challenges outside of their "comfort zone" and enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Competent managers are continuous learners. Stibel (2017), a brain scientist, gives the following advice to leaders (managers) that will contribute to confidence enhancement: "The brain version of leading is learning. Learning propels us forward and allows us to do new things. To lead, we must first learn, gaining knowledge and then wisdom, which we ultimately share with others" (p. 2B).

Confident managers aggressively seek feedback and input from staff and super ordinates in creating innovative approaches to solving problems and identifying opportunities. Schwantes (2017) notes the importance of managers being productive and advocates they practice the *52 and 17 Rule*—52 minutes of focused and concentrated work followed by 17 minutes of relaxation. Productive managers are likely to be confident and feel secure in their roles. This sense of security allows them to utilize vulnerable behaviors that enhance relationships, trust, and motivation of staff and work colleagues.

3.0 Vulnerability

It is important for managers to be unafraid to show case their vulnerabilities. To be sure, there are plenty of situations where going out of the way to project weakness isn't a good thing, but there are also many instances where admitting vulnerability will help engender trust and buy-in among those led. Showing vulnerability is *relatable*—its hows that the manager is human and not simply a "know it all boss" (Kalman, 2017, p.3).

Vulnerability means managers are exposing their uncertainties and taking emotional risks (Krznicar, 2014). A manager shows vulnerability by being open to input and feedback from staff and others, even if such information is critical of the manager's opinions and actions. It means that the manager encourages others to speak out and welcomes their comments when they are contrary to the manager's position, and even communicating that the manager could be wrong regarding a particular manner.

Vulnerability is shown by managers acknowledging that they do not have the answers to every question or the solutions to all problems. Stibel (2017) indicates that managers need to admit what they do not understand and be willing to solicit assistance from others in order to grow and be more confident. A manager who displays vulnerability does not advocate submission, but has the courage to honestly share with staff his/her doubts, feelings, and apprehensions. (Seppala, 2014). As with many leadership behaviors, the key to the effective application of vulnerability is knowing when, where, and how to be both in control and vulnerable.

Vulnerability is creating a climate that encourages staff to share opinions, perceptions, and divergent views. When managers authentically display vulnerability, they foster innovation, confidence, trust, loyalty, creativity, and a sense of "connectedness" among and between staff members and themselves. Martinuzzi (2009a) stresses that authenticity is the application of "candor and the avoidance of all deception" by managers when interacting with others (p. 8). Martinuzzi (2009a) further indicates that authenticity implies a steadfast commitment to honesty and truthfulness.

Many managers adhere to the belief that they should keep a safe emotional distance from staff and exude the use of authority regarding what needs to be done and how to do it. Some people in the work environment may think that vulnerability shows weakness and indecisiveness on the part of the manager. Managers adhering to this belief often use the power of their position to cause staff to get the work done when differences or disagreements arise. Managers adhering to keeping "emotional distance" and using authority and power to cause staff to act need to reassess their mode of operation and consider using vulnerability. If properly applied, the results of vulnerability will be rewarding for them and the staff, and productivity will increase.

It takes courage and persistence—as well as confidence, positive self-esteem, and time—for managers to establish the perception of their vulnerabilities among staff and others in the work environment. Sometimes managers must consciously put aside facades they have built up over time in order to be more likely to be perceived as being vulnerable and open to differences of opinions and criticism. The pursuit of vulnerability by managers must be *authentic* and *real* or others will view the efforts as contrived and phony. Managers who adhere to the servant-leader approach often are more effective regarding vulnerability. A servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop to their maximum potential. A manager adhering to the servant-leader philosophy understands that staff hunger for appreciation and make sure they provide such feedback to individual staff members (Martinuzzi, 2009a).

Confident managers are often more likely to be willing to display vulnerability than those who are insecure. Managers who are initially reluctant to expose themselves through vulnerability should phase into it, starting with small increments for one or two behaviors. Assuming this leads to positive results, the manager can then expand progressively by continuing to add additional behaviors. Effectively displaying vulnerability by the manager fosters trustworthiness, authenticity, courage, innovation, creativity, loyalty, and opportunities to develop staff members and oneself. Bryant (2017) in a study of C.E.O.'s over a decade identified *trustworthiness* as the most important quality of effective leaders. Brown (2014a) indicates that a manager effectively displaying vulnerability to staff creates a strong *social connection*—a sense of “oneness” between staff and the manager—that coupled with authenticity, is a powerful human connector.

4.0 Empathy

Empathy, a part of emotional intelligence, is a manager's skill set for sensing and relating to the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and general situation of staff and colleagues who are experiencing emotional difficulties and challenges. It is akin to the manager putting oneself in the position of the other person and attempting to see the situation through that person's eyes (Krznicaric, 2014). The manager's skills in focusing and paying close attention to the feelings and the situations of other people are essential in being able to effectively apply empathy. Martinuzzi (2009a) believes that empathy feeds positive relationships between managers and staff and “keep relationships running smoothly” (p. 20).

Managers should not confuse empathy with sympathy. Sympathy emphasizes one's display of sorrow or pity for the hardships encountered by another person and does not involve trying to understand the other person's emotions or perspectives (Krznicaric, 2014). Empathy is feeling *with* someone else, whereas sympathy is feeling bad *for* someone else (Pink, 2006).

Regarding empathy, Martinuzzi (2009b) indicates that “it's a soft, sometimes abstract tool in a leader's [manager's] toolkit that can lead to hard, tangible results” (p. 2). Empathy does not require the manager to agree with the other person's perspective, but it does require acknowledging and attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of that person. In order to effectively apply empathy, managers need to be willing to leave their comfort zone of personal values and beliefs and step into the shoes of the other person to perceive the situation from that person's perspective. Empathic managers must be capable of understanding what is transpiring in the person's life through sensing and relating to the feelings, thoughts, and general perceptions of the staff member or colleague encountering emotional difficulties (Holt, Marques, Hu, & Wood, 2017).

Brown (2014b) explains empathy as “A driver of connection, it is a bonding agent that strengthens relationships. It is one human being connecting with another, acknowledging a person's circumstance without diminishing or rationalizing it. Empathy is an acknowledgement without judgment” (Brown, 2014, p. 1). When compared with some of the traditional managers of years gone by, the present day enlightened manager realizes the importance of being able to mentally connect with staff members in order to better understand what inspires and motivates them—empathy aids in this pursuit.

Goleman (2017) identifies three distinct types of empathy relevant to managers: (1) cognitive empathy, (2) emotional empathy, and (3) empathetic concern. *Cognitive empathy* is the manager's skills in understanding perspectives, mental state, and feelings experienced within another person's frame of reference. As indicated by Goleman (2017) “exercising cognitive empathy requires leaders [managers] to think about feelings rather than to feel them directly” (p. 4). Cognitive empathy requires managers to be self-aware by understanding their own feelings in order to comprehend the feelings of others.

To effectively apply cognitive empathy, a manager needs to meaningfully explain her/his feelings about the situation to the other person in a concerning manner in order to create a bond and positive relationship. Curiosity and inquisitiveness aid managers in effectively utilizing cognitive empathy.

Emotional empathy is represented by managers responding with specifically appropriate emotions and feelings to another person's mental state and being able to identify as also having been affected by what the other person is experiencing. Effective emotional empathy serves managers well in the roles of coaching, mentoring, and helping staff and colleagues work through difficult emotional times. Emotional empathy is dependent upon the manager combining two types of focused attention: (1) conscious and deliberate concentration on the other person's feelings and the specifics of the situation and (2) awareness of facial expressions, voice, and other signs of concern or distress (Goleman, 2017).

Empathic concern is used by managers for more acute emotional difficulties of a staff member or colleague. It is the manager's skills at sensing what the person needs and displaying *compassion* in response to that person's suffering and difficulties. Bloom (2016) supports the use of compassion in this context if compassion is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care of others, as well as a strong motivation to improve the others' well-being (p. 138). Compassion requires a manager to personally connect with the other person's suffering and distress with authentic empathic concern. The manager must sincerely value the other person's well-being. Managers are cautioned regarding possible *compassion fatigue* when engaging in empathy concern for an extended time period. Compassion fatigue means that dealing with the other person's situation begins to take a toll on the manager's ability to perform effectively.

Managers often become aware of staff members or colleagues experiencing difficulties through observing their behavior and emotional state on the job, and concluding that something is "wrong." Some situations requiring empathy for others by the manager are easier to identify, such as a death in the family. Other situations, such as one prompted by a staff member spending huge amounts of time away from work as a caregiver, are more difficult to identify and take longer to do so.

When a staff member's performance is in question because of emotional issues from work, personal life, or both; the managers may initially believe it is necessary to be aggressive, and make it very clear to the staff member what is acceptable and unacceptable job performance. In these situations, some managers may even react with anger. This approach erodes trust, loyalty, and the person's motivation to work collaboratively with the manager. In the long run, taking a more *compassionate and sincere* approach to conversations with such a staff member, with the purpose of determining the cause of the performance problem, is the best approach (Seppala, 2017). Utilizing empathy in the context presented here, the manager's objectives are: (a) assuring there is a positive relationship with the staff member, (b) "digging in" through the effective use of the empathy process to find out the heart of the problem(s), and (c) improving the staff member's job performance.

Martinuzzi (2009b) offers these suggestions for managers as tools to aid in effectively utilizing empathy: (a) truly listen with your ears, eyes, and heart to get *context clues* for better understanding; (b) get the person to "open up" and share, which might take several conversations; (c) guard against interrupting the person in conversations; (d) give your undivided attention and focus to the person; (e) take a sincere personal interest in the person; and (f) create a sense of "connectedness" by demonstrating you genuinely care. The ability to empathize is not a fixed or limited quantity of a manager. Krznaric (2014) states that "there is overwhelming agreement among the experts that our personal empathy quota is not fixed: we can develop our empathic potential throughout our lives" (p. 27).

Effective communication is the foundation on which rapport, trust, and meaningful exchange of information occurs in order for the manager to effectively utilize empathy skills with a staff member or colleague. Effective two-way communication is required to ensure that the manager and other person share insights and observations and have a common interpretation of the key elements discussed in the empathy process. The manager must consistently *check for understanding* to reinforce and clarify the specifics of the situation and all key factors associated with it. An example of checking for understanding is a question such as: "Let me make sure I understand what you're saying is . . .?" (Zenger & Folkman, 2017, p. 32).

Managers also need to be aware of the *93 Percent Rule* with respect to communication. The *93 Percent Rule* indicates that the words stated accounts for only 7 percent of the total message people receive and the remaining 93 percent of the message communicated comes from tone of voice, and body language (Jacobsen, 2013).

Attending, reflecting, exploring, self-disclosure, acceptance, and supporting are essential communication skills needed by managers for effectively applying empathy (Bartz, 2017).

1. **Attending:** The manager expresses interest in what the staff member is saying and feeling by:

- **Physical attending:** The manager's general posture, facing the other person, maintaining eye contact, sitting in a relaxed rather than a tense position, and having a pleasant facial expression.
- **Mental attending:** The manager paying close attention to the other person's verbal and nonverbal behaviors and relating what is being communicated to what has previously been discussed. (This is "in the moment" mindfulness.)

2. **Reflecting:** The manager displays a sincere desire to understand the other person's situation and feelings by reviewing what is expressed, clarifying it, and periodically summarizing to make sure that the meaning and intent have been correctly understood by each person. The manager also asks questions in order to promote discovery and insights for both parties.

3. **Exploring:** The manager examines and probes what the other person is stating to identify specific concerns or problems, while being careful not to interrupt the flow of the conversation. If an incomplete explanation or contradictory information is given, the manager asks questions in order to obtain more information and prompt the other person to provide an "in-depth" explanation.

4. **Self-disclosure:** The manager shares thoughts and information with the other person related to the specifics of the situation being discussed based on the manager's background experiences. This provides a supportive and constructive relationship concerning what the other person has communicated.

5. **Acceptance:** The manager shows appreciation and respect for the other person as a fellow human, is not defensive if questioned, and makes sure the other person's dignity is maintained.

6. **Supporting:** The manager draws out and identifies positive actions the other person has taken that focus on enhancing self-esteem and confidence.

The manager needs to be adept and sensitive when using each of these six communication skills in order to effectively utilize empathy with a staff member or colleague. It may not be necessary, however, to use *all* of these skills during a particular conversation. As an example, self-disclosure might not be used in a particular conversation if the manager believes sharing personal background information would distract from the heart of the issues identified and discussed.

5.0 Concluding Thoughts

Managers need many attributes and skill sets to be successful. Confidence, vulnerability, and empathy are essential to a manager's effective performance, job satisfaction, and career development. Confidence is represented by managers' skills in creating a sense of presence, making decisions with convictions, being influential, taking calculated risks, and challenging themselves to be the best. Vulnerability is managers exposing their uncertainties and taking emotional risks. Vulnerability is shown when a manager displays openness to input and feedback from staff and others, even if such information is critical of the manager's opinions or actions. Empathy is a manager's skill set for sensing and relating to the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and general situation of staff and colleagues and recognizing and addressing their concerns when they are experiencing emotional difficulties or challenges. Effective utilization of confidence, vulnerability, and empathy will serve managers well in their present positions and significantly contribute to their career development.

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