Growing Taller

The Role of Empathy and Acceptance in Building Up Followers

—Jae Webb

While unable to agree on many of the subtle points of what leadership is or is not, many scholars define leadership as the influence of one person over another person or persons with the impetus of completing a goal or objective (Northouse 2010; Chemers 2014; Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House 2004). Two concepts are predominate in this understanding of leadership. One is the objective of accomplishing tasks; the other is the presence of power or influence in the relationship between a leader and her or his followers. The latter sets the stage for the focus of this paper, the examination and importance of empathy and acceptance in leadership practices.

An understanding of empathy and acceptance in leadership practice begins by considering the importance of followers and the dynamic of the leader-follower relationship. Power or influence exists in association with the leadership role, but it is not necessarily something possessed outside of follower's willingness to engage with the leader. Jesuit philosopher and scholar Lonergan (1997) reflected upon the authenticity of this power, claiming that the "source of [the] power is cooperation. Cooperation is twofold . . . [and] as the source of power is cooperation, so the carrier of power is the community" (551). In this community, comprised of the leader and followers, the leader serves primus inter pares, or first among equals, of this cooperative. This consideration of the importance of followers as equal and valued persons is in line with Greenleaf's (2002) practice of servant-leadership.

Greenleaf (2002) claimed that leadership was a practice grounded in service to another so the other may become more—more free, more autonomous, more wise, more capable, and more healthy (27). Greenleaf believed that when leaders worked to accomplish this growth, in servant fashion, others would respond with allegiance (24). Those who are served

and led then become more likely to be servants themselves, and more likely to benefit the society around them—especially those who are disadvantaged (27). Greenleaf included in this process of followers becoming more the concept of *growing taller*, and said "People grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are" (35). Four elements in this statement are worth examining: (1) empathy, (2) acceptance, (3), growing taller or becoming more, and (4) the leader's behavior toward a follower. I will endeavor to unpack each of these elements in this article and then bring them back together to demonstrate how leaders can develop and use these as tools in their leadership practices.

GREENLEAF ON EMPATHY AND ACCEPTANCE

Greenleaf (2002) was clear that a leader is one who, by practice has the ability to go "out ahead to show the way" (28). The leader is one who can identify and establish goals to pursue (29). Without the ability to identify the direction in which others should go, it becomes decidedly difficult to be considered a leader. There are many people with vision and foresight who do not have the ability to engage others to follow. In servant-leadership, recruiting others as followers is not an end, but rather an outcome of the servant nature of the leader (24). The focus of the servant-leader is on creating healthier and more sustainable systems (307), institutions (65), and societies (62), and engaging others has great potential to augment this work. It is in creating this followership and building it up that empathy and acceptance play a key role. While Greenleaf did not talk at great length about these two concepts, what he did say on empathy and acceptance was emphatic. Greenleaf was adamant that a "leader always empathizes, always accepts the [other] person" (33).

This empathy and acceptance practice did not mean Greenleaf (2002) did not believe in challenging or rejecting the actions of followers. When the effort or the work of a follower is not adequate to the task at hand, then a leader should in fact refuse to accept this from the follower (34). However, this is different than rejecting the person. Greenleaf is clear that acceptance of the person "requires a tolerance of imperfection" (34). This must be done with the understanding "there aren't any perfect people" (35), including the servant-leader. The responsibility of the leader, through the exercise of empathy and acceptance, is to "weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be" (35).

Greenleaf (2002) also placed a great importance on the practice of listening (30), which is foundational in both empathy and acceptance. This practice of listening was something Greenleaf believed should be an inherent response for leaders, especially when presented with a problem (31). The act of listening to others is key to both understanding the perspective of the other and conveying acceptance to the other. Listening, empathizing, and accepting create meaningful exchanges for the follower in communicating with the leader (32). Since Greenleaf penned his thoughts on the practice of empathy and acceptance in leadership, the social and physical sciences have been hard at work in examining these concepts.

UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

Modern-era understanding of the word *empathy* can be traced back to eighteenth-century philosopher Adam Smith. In Smith's (2010) *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* he states, "Our fellow-feeling for the misery of others, [occurs] by changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels" (5). This fellow-feeling caused by imaginative perspective-taking predates the existence of empathy as a word in English by nearly 150 years. Smith was among the first in the modern era to claim when one considers the situation of another, one can share in the experience with the other to a degree. This conceptualization parallels the etymological origins of *empathy*. The English word has strong ties to the German concept *einfühlung*, which is often understood as feeling into or understanding, and more recently has been translated as its counterpart *empathy* (Jahoda 2005, 158). An etymological perspective on empathy reveals the Greek *pathos*, meaning both suffering and experience, thus em-path-y supports the German understanding of *feeling into* the experience of an other. Colloquial phrases such as *putting yourself in someone's shoes* and *try and see things from my perspective* convey this empathy concept as well. While these and other phrases helped to inculcate empathy into our culture, a neuroscience approach reveals more about what it means to experience empathy.

Recent research and technologies have allowed for an understanding of empathy on a neurochemical level (Decety and Ickles 2009). What Smith (2010) described existentially, modern scientists can now witness empirically through observation of mirror neurons (Gallese 2005). It is through these synaptic responses that motor mimicry presents empathy as a process

that begins with the physiological (Decety and Ickes 2009). At its most basic, this can be understood through the urge to yawn that one feels after witnessing another yawn. Witnessing the affect or behavior of another person activates certain neural processes in the viewer in response to the visual stimuli, which creates an "overlap in cognition, feeling, or behavior" (van Baaren et al. 2009, 33). This mimetic urge, which occurs instinctually and automatically, serves as a gateway of invitation into another's experience. When one encounters another person, he or she responds to the situation, the affect, and the actions of the other on a biochemical level that manifests in behaviors and actions (Decety and Ickles 2009).

In much of the twentieth-century research, empathy is bifurcated into an affective field and a cognitive field (Krznaric 2012). Affective empathy refers to appropriate emotive matching as a response to another's situation, whereas cognitive empathy refers to intellectually being able to consider the role or perspective of another to create an appropriate understanding of the other's situation (Dadds et al. 2008, 112). Hoffman (1984) suggests instead of making a dichotomy of these two aspects of empathy, they should be considered to work in tandem, informing each other as the empathic process occurs. The affective experience triggered by the visual stimuli of another's joy at a newborn child is augmented and informed by one's own memory of having a newborn child. Both of these avenues work together to create an empathic connection with a new parent; perspective-taking alone is not comprehensively representative of empathy (de Waal 2008, 285). To truly engage in empathy there must be both the ability to cognitively assume the perspective of another and also engage in emotive matching or sharing with the other; when either is missing, the empathic experience is incomplete.

Frans de Waal (2008) theorizes that the empathic tendency in people has developed to allow humanity to "quickly and automatically relate to the emotional states of others, which is essential for the regulation of social interactions, coordinated activity, and cooperation toward shared goals" (282). This supports empathy as a component of strong social interdependence and prosocial behavior, which are both conducive to the advancement of individual relationships and societal systems. In the helping professions such as healthcare, counseling, or social work, a person is perceived as more empathic when mimicking the nonverbal behavior of a client (van Baaren et al. 2009, 33). The experience of mimicked behavior creates a space in which one person becomes comfortable and willing to be vulnerable

because of the perception of the other person as the same. This state of shared experience helps foster the culture of cooperation that leaders seek to create in organizations.

Creating this perception of empathy increases many prosocial behaviors, such as cooperating, sharing, donating, and other altruistic acts, while also decreasing levels of social prejudice and aggression toward others (Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 85). People have also been shown to display significantly greater generosity after perceiving empathy from others (van Baaren et al. 2009, 35). Empathy psychologically opens people to explore the natural social tendencies of humanity by reducing their fears that the other is too foreign or too alien to engage with. These fears have historically kept people apart (Rifkin 2009) and can keep people from engaging with leaders. When leaders empathize with followers, a state of caring is generated in the follower (Gouber, Craig, and Buysse 2009, 160), which correlates to the degree of personal investment they are willing to give toward the leader's vision and direction.

It is important to note that empathy within social frameworks is a function of interdependent persons and not a codependent function (Decety and Ickles 2009). The isomorphic emotional state caused by empathy requires one to consciously recognize the other as a separate and external source of emotion (Pfeifer and Dapretto 2009, 183). This takes place to preclude "self-focused distress and to foster other-oriented concern" (183). The degree to which individuals can master this skill of appropriately identifying, understanding, and responding to another's current thoughts and feelings is referred to as "empathic accuracy" (Ickes 1993, 588). This supports the understanding that empathy, though it begins with automated physiological responses, extends to a practice and skill existing on a spectrum of exactitude – a skill leaders can develop.

Much of what neuroscience and advanced scientific observation have revealed within recent years supports the proposal that three phenomena work in tandem to create an experience of empathy: "the ability to share the emotional experience of another, the cognitive capacity to understand it, and the ability to simultaneously regulate one's own feelings; that is, to maintain the distinction between self and other's feelings" (Bozarth 2009, 110). Receiving empathy from others creates a sense of security and trust and a cooperative disposition toward the other (de Waal 2008, 282); it lays the groundwork for acceptance to take place by creating an environment where two persons exist together through congruence of experience.

At face value, acceptance is a much easier concept to understand than empathy. It is generally defined as a person's act of receiving or taking in. This is easy to understand when referring to transactional exchanges with money or goods, as when one accepts dollars in exchange for a meal, but it is more complex when referring to relationships between people. To receive or take in a person in a human relationship can have many different meanings.

An understanding of acceptance in relationships between two or more people begins with an inquiry into acceptance of the self on an individual basis (Berger 1952, 781). Self-acceptance is a matter of personal well-being (Flett et al. 2003). When an individual is unable to experience acceptance of his or her self, it leads to psychological distress (120). A person able to experience acceptance of the self without condition, on the other hand, is predisposed toward a balanced and well-adjusted state of being (Rogers 1952). For a person to accept his or her self does not exclusively indicate the person is complacent and not interested in improving the self; rather, it merely means the person is capable of accepting his or her self as is, while improvement may or may not be ongoing. When a person cannot accept his or her self, the person is in a constant state of unrest or conflict, and the efforts of the self become undermined (Flett et al. 2003). The inability to engage in self-acceptance also impairs a person's ability to accept others (Flett et al. 2003). The paradox then exists where one is unable to take in and receive the self, and at the same time unable to escape the self; this then causes psychological distress.

The ability or inability to engage in the practice of self-acceptance has a direct connection to the experience of acceptance in social situations (Berger 1952). The drive for acceptance is widely recognized by sociologists and psychologists (Williams, Forgas, and Von Hippel 2005; Rimm 2002), and is most basically related to survival. There is an intrinsic will within people to survive, and throughout history people have needed others to survive, so therefore people want others to accept them (Plato 1941, 55). This formula, although simplistic, explains the basic need for acceptance. This drive for acceptance takes many forms, and grows more complex as the basic components of this need are met (Maslow 1943). As basic needs for survival are met, people's more complex needs, although not directly linked to survival, are perceived to be as indispensable as the survival needs (Maslow 1968).

The complex nature of human relationships and the human self is difficult to compartmentalize into any single drive or group of several. In part this is because of the interconnected nature of these drives and their dependent origins. The drive for acceptance shares a deep connection with the human desire for recognition (Kilpatrick, Stone, and Cole 1949, 561). While the first step of acceptance may start with the self, which is important, it requires validation by others in society to maintain its integrity. Self-acceptance is a blend of recognizing traits and facts within the self that one appreciates and taking in the traits and facts that others recognize about the self and internalizing them; in this way the recognition of others plays a large role in the acceptance people experience intrapersonally and interpersonally.

This drive is so important to a person that the fear of rejection, and even the thought of not being accepted, can create antisocial behaviors in a person and lead to an absence of positive social bonding (Cameron et al. 2010). The drive for acceptance is so pervasive and basic that it is often established, or fails to be established, in the first moments of an interaction with a new person (Anthony, Wood, and Holmes 2007). When persons believe they are not being accepted—and they often underestimate the acceptance they are receiving—they divest themselves of the social bond and seek points of acceptance from others (Cameron et al. 2010). This perception of the lack of received recognition by another person contributes to low self-esteem; that is, the person perceives his or her self as less rather than more (Cameron et al. 2010, 527). This perception can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for a person. If a person believes he or she is not capable of garnering acceptance or recognition from others, he or she becomes risk-averse to trying and then naturally experiences less acceptance, which is followed by a correlating decline in self-esteem (Anthony, Wood, and Holmes 2007, 430).

Acceptance has recently been found to be among the stronger drives within the self, especially in contrast to the concept of power or dominance (Leary, Cottrell, and Phillips 2001, 907). The desire to experience dominance is also closely linked to self-esteem and, historically, to basic survival needs. However, when correlated to a rise in self-esteem the desire for acceptance surpassed the desire to experience dominance (Leary, Cottrell, and Phillips 2001). While some have emphasized that the exercise of power is intrinsically valuable practice (Nietzsche 1989; Heidegger 1996), it appears that this experience is valued less in social exchanges than the drive to experience acceptance from others. People prefer to be liked, as experienced

through acceptance, rather than feared or respected, as experienced through having power over others.

When people experience acceptance, especially by a leader, it empowers them to accept themselves more readily. Acceptance, both of the self and in social situations, directly correlates to the perceived value a person attributes to his or her self and supports Greenleaf's (2002) statement that acceptance enables and empowers a follower to become more.

UNDERSTANDING "BECOMING MORE"

Four of the criteria Greenleaf (2002) wanted leadership to be measured by were increases in health, wisdom, freedom, and autonomy of those whom they are serving and leading (27). Within the human condition, becoming more is, to a large degree, a natural process of living and interacting with the world. People, by nature, have it in them to grow and develop beyond their current state. As Lonergan (1997) noted, "For it is the paradox of [humanity] that what [one] is by nature is so much less than what [one] can become. . . . Facts, it is said, are stubborn things. But there is a sense in which, I believe, it is true to say the facts about [a person] can be outflanked. For a change in [a person], a development of potentialities that are no less real, because like all potentialities they are latent, not only is itself a fact but also can be a permanent source of new facts that cumulatively alter the complexion of the old" (33–34).

People have an inherent tendency to develop to the fullest extent possible the capacities that enhance or advance the person (Rogers 1959, 196). This occurs in all people naturally but can be obstructed through social dynamics and infrastructures. Freire (1970, 1985) explains how leadership enables followers to achieve this growth, or prevents them from achieving it. He worked for most of his life to address issues of inequity in society through the education of marginalized and disadvantaged populations. The research he conducted in pedagogical methods with impoverished populations led him to specific insights regarding the existential problems faced in becoming more, in rising above one's current situation. Freire (1970) exposed an oppressive power dynamic that supported this inequality and discovered direct links between the use of power and the lack of education and opportunity followers experienced. In economic terms, the "peasant feels inferior to the boss because the boss seems to be the only one who knows how to run things" (45), and the boss deprives the peasant of opportunities to know more.

Freire (1985) claims that to counter this oppressive imbalance, leaders must actively recognize the existence and importance of the extant power dynamic and intentionally act to counter its potentially negative attributes; "washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (122). Addressing this dynamic begins with "critically recognizing its causes" (Freire 1970, 29), such as power actions that are dehumanizing and that diminish the follower's status, such as coercion. Greenleaf (2002) promoted the use of persuasion, which treats the other as an equal, in contrast to coercion, which subjugates the other (44). An oppressed follower cannot grow or become more, but instead enters into a cycle of oppression in which he or she seeks to replace his or her oppressor by out-oppressing him or her. This "existential duality of the oppressed who are at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose image they have internalized" (Freire 1970, 43) undermines trust and stifles the growth of the personhood of followers. The key to breaking this cycle of oppression is dialogical engagement between those with power and those without power (Freire 1970, 69).

Freire claimed it was dialogue that gave humans the opportunity to experience significance (69). Greenleaf (2002) believed that through raising artful questions and engaging others in dialogue, servant-leaders could create relationships rich with congruence and equanimity (43). In this practice of dialogue, followers become validated and empowered. The dialectical nature of this relationship is the root of cooperation (Lonergan 1997). In reaching this state of cooperation the ontological perspectives of those who have been oppressed can be reshaped by leadership (Freire 1970) and can be healed from prior wounds of oppression.

When leadership empathizes and accepts the person in his or her entirety, the concomitant result is that the follower becomes more (Greenleaf 2002, 35). Greenleaf by no means intended to say that if you show empathy toward a follower, that person will wake up the morning after and be healthier than the day before. The realms of health, wisdom, freedom, and autonomy are all directly connected to the perceived sense of personal worth and quality of life that followers experience. The experience of persistent low self-esteem is directly related to poor health and poor performance (Trzesniewski et al. 2006). When leadership empathizes and accepts followers, they are validating and supporting a sense of value within the self of the follower through dialogue and egalitarian action. This builds the follower up. Research shows that empathy on the part of a leader is positively related to job performance

(Sadri, Weber, and Gentry 2011, 825), especially in cultures with a high power distance. This supports empathy as a mediating and constructive component in relationships with a power disparity where oppression has a naturally higher potential of occurring.

Leadership can accept facts about a follower—that is, accepting the terms of employment would mean a follower's work would be accepted in exchange for remuneration. This is not an invalid form of acceptance, but it is largely irrelevant to the concept Greenleaf (2002) was putting forward. When Greenleaf claimed acceptance made a difference in the personhood of the follower (e.g., the follower becomes more), this can only be understood as personal acceptance. This means leadership accepts *who* the person is, not what the person does. It is important to note that accepting what the person does, when this action is insufficient, can actually lead to the person devaluing his or her self (Kegan 1982, 185). To reject the follower, in essence to fail to accept her or him, devalues the follower through a statement about his or her worth as a person. Leaders who do not act in concert with followers, but insist on imposing autocratic decisions, do not empower followers, they oppress them (Freire 1970, 108). Acceptance of another means the other is met as equal in worth, and does not discard context, but seeks to rise above it through dialogical relations.

Empathy and acceptance are constructive elements in human relationships. They build up dialogue and consensus, with benefits to both parties involved. A focus on the other person's state of being was reported to have a profound effect on the practitioner of the behaviors (Bozarth 2009). In the practice of empathy and acceptance, both leader and follower can enter a mutually altered state of consciousness, where both gain an ability to transcend their current state and together experience their own humanity more fully.

EMPATHY AND ACCEPTANCE IN SERVANT-LEADER RELATIONSHIPS

Though all leadership requires some focus on the relationship with followers, servant-leadership is unique in listing empathy and acceptance as key tenets of the leadership practice (Spears and Lawrence 2002, 5). Many theories of leadership speak of the positive effects of personal attention being paid to followers by leadership (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995; Spreitzer, De Janasz, and Quinn 1999), but servant-leadership is distinctive in the manner in which the follower and his or her development serve as the focal point of leader behavior.

All relationships involve the exchange of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Harvey and Pauwels 2009), and in this sense all relationships contain a transactional component. However, in servant-leadership, taking a vested interest in the well-being of the follower and serving him or her is not a means to an end but something arising out of the servant nature of the leader (Greenleaf 2002). So while there is a transactional component important for servant-leaders to understand, these transactions do not fully define the depth, complexity, or purpose of servant-leaders. The complex responsive processes that occur in organizations between a leader and a follower are comprised of diverse influences of context, logic, emotion, values, beliefs, and much more (Stacy 2001). To engage and continue to be engaged with followers in this environment, leaders must sustain a level of trust with followers.

Empathy and acceptance serve a key function in the leadership relationship because they build trust (Joseph and Winston 2005), which is essential to cooperation. Trust in a relationship is generally understood as a belief that the other person is reliable, authentic, or cogent and will continue to be so. For followers to put their trust in leadership, and thus accept the leadership as valid, requires a belief that the leadership will prove reliable and effective. Leadership seeks this trust because it directly correlates with the degree to which those in an organization accept the decisions of leadership (Horsager 2012). The role of trust in a leader-follower relationship is of great importance for organizational operation (Tyler and Degoey 1996, 332). Leadership must pull followers into a shared vision, or join followers to create a shared vision. In either instance empathy between leaders and followers helps to create this trust and congruence. "Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted" (Greenleaf 2002, 35).

Empathy and acceptance are largely congruent in Greenleaf's (2002) practice, but are not synonymous. Empathy provides an overture to relationship; it establishes an invitation by communicating to a follower that he or she is in a place of understanding. Acceptance is what solidifies the experience of congruence the leader and follower have created. This becomes a cycle of empathy and acceptance as the relationship moves from the initial stages of transaction to transformation. As the experiences of empathy and acceptance build, trust becomes solidified and the follower has grounds to believe the relationship will continue. Empathy encourages openness, acceptance affirms it, and the relationship with the leader grows stronger.

Research supports that the character of the relationship a leader has with a follower ripples throughout an organization to foster relationships

among other organizational members that mirrors that of the leader and follower (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995, 220). When a leader can inspire trust through empathy and acceptance, these traits are supported among other relationships in the organization. Organizations comprised of such psychologically healthy relationships fostered by empathetic leaders outperform their peers, often twofold, in higher financial performance (Keller and Price 2011). This begs the question, if empathy and acceptance can have positive effects on individual and organizational performance, how do I become an empathic and accepting leader?

The human brain is a remarkable organ responsible for the regulation of behavior in social relationships. There is a proprioceptive adaptation that occurs in the brain as people grow, change, interact, and develop over the course of their lives; in essence, we learn. It is characteristic of human beings to adjust to their surroundings, to be successful in their environment. Empathy, while hard-wired into us, is also a learned behavior. As we experience this with, from, and for others, we are changed. The experience of empathy instigates action, and various studies highlight how empathy serves as the motivational center for other-oriented action (de Waal 2008, 292). When this empathy center of the brain is regularly engaged in a purposeful manner it increases the ease with which it operates (Dalai Lama 1999, 98). In this implementation, empathy becomes habitualized and naturalized to the practitioner who considers others and seeks to engage their experience intentionally. Greenleaf (2002) was clear that in servant-leaders the desire to serve others arises naturally from the nature of the leader, but this does not mean that this tendency cannot be developed and nurtured.

Research (Watson and Greenberg 2009, 128) has identified five specific practices that can help leaders to develop empathic abilities and communicate perception of acceptance: (1) visualizing and actively imagining the experiences of the other person, (2) paying close attention to one's own bodily experiences, to explore emotions arising from one's own physical reactions to another person, (3) carefully listening to the details and context of the other's personal history and incorporating these into an understanding of the other, (4) pausing regularly to consider the perspective of the other, and (5) practicing identifying emotions in others through nonverbal cues and behaviors. These behaviors have been shown to increase both the empathic accuracy of the practitioner as well as perceptions of empathic concern and support by the recipient. While not viewed in this fashion previously, these behaviors are likely to increase the servant nature

of the practitioner through increased concern for others as the practitioner develops other-oriented behaviors. Acting as a servant and empathy share such a close relationship because both are strongly focused on and centered around the *other* with whom the servant-leader is in relationship. Reason supports that an increase in the ability and tendency to empathize would create an ability and tendency to act in a servant fashion, because empathy serves as an instigator of altruistic action (de Waal 2009).

COMPENDIUM

When leaders empathize with followers they share in the experience and the being of the follower, and when they accept the follower they validate the person's experience and being. The validation, increase in self-esteem, and concomitant growth in perceived value that accompany the practices of empathizing and accepting followers are powerful tools in the process of followers becoming more. The very perception of empathy and acceptance by a person has been found to contribute directly to personal growth and psychological health (Bozarth 2009). The practices of empathizing and accepting also foster an environment of trust and cooperation that facilitates the accomplishment of tasks. Empathy serves leadership in organizations through its ability to promote "cooperation toward shared goals" (de Waal 2008, 282), and acceptance provides the place of security for followers to work toward these goals.

Those who take up the role of leadership are in a unique place to facilitate this process of *becoming more* for followers because of the trust and power granted them. Among the responsibilities leaders assume should be the development of behaviors and tendencies that communicate empathy and acceptance to followers. This responsibility should not be taken up lightly but with an earnest and servant nature, so that the world, like followers, may become a more free, wise, and healthy place to live.

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