

**Leadership is the highest expression of our nature, experience and willpower. Human leadership is expressed in physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual forms. Depression is the opposite – we collapse inward. But what if leadership is flawed or bad – or even evil? We explore current thinking on the ongoing evolution of empathy and how we might nurture the roots of skilled empathy rather than stupidity or worse – cruelty.**

Empathy is a primary focus of our leadership development. It provides a powerful insight and practical skills for leaders. Empathy is often viewed as uniquely defining human life. This is incorrect. Empathy is deeply rooted in the evolution of social animals and continues to evolve in the human condition. It is a poorly defined concept that urgently needs clarity.

Several recent books review biological to social perspectives on empathy. We refer to these texts as we define how empathy is evolving and will define our success or failure in the Anthropocene (period in which man defines the planet).

## Empathy defined

Empathy is the ability to attune ourselves to others; defined by the expression of behaviours:

- a. Giving your full attention to someone
- b. Detecting and interpreting non-verbal cues
- c. Acknowledging others' perspectives
- d. Understanding another's felt experience

Empathy is not action but awareness. The practice is intensely demanding. We must be aware of our own states and able to master them. Fear, anger or craving can obliterate empathy. We read daily of people injured and murdered when impulse control fails. Conversely, when aware and steady, empathy opens a portal to the highest expression of skilful assistance and creative conflict resolution. Apes are very good at it!

## Empathy: Evolution & Biology

Empathy language has become confusing. Biology helps clarify our terminology:

**Mimicry:** many species mimic others' expressions movements and behaviours. It helps us bond and can accelerate learning. Oscillators facilitate, 100 million years old and rarely conscious.

**Emotional Contagion:** most mammals detect and demonstrate the emotional state of others, e.g. fear, pain and excitement. Mirror neurons facilitate state matching. Unconscious and activates adaptive behaviour. Absent in autism.

**Consolation:** a big leap seen only in apes (chimpanzee, bonobo, us), elephants and dolphins where one takes action to comfort others and alleviate suffering. The action may be as much to comfort self as to help others. In advanced species there is clear evidence of perspective taking.

**Targeted helping (altruism):** emotion and understanding come together in skilled assistance. Apes, elephants and dolphins – only species with spindle cells (Von Economo Neurons) – are able to balance emotion with considered assistance of others. Self-awareness and emotional control are necessary. More likely in dominant individuals.

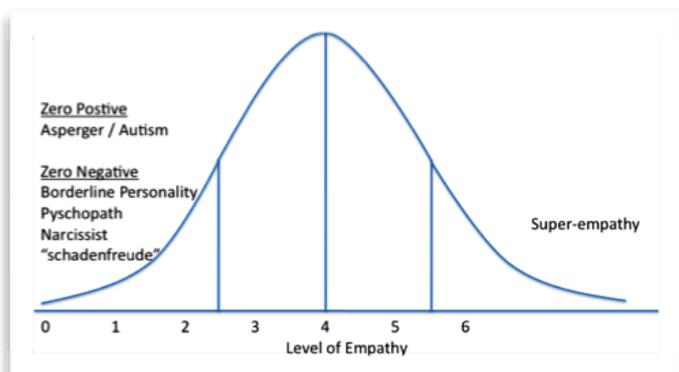
**Conflict resolution:** one of the key roles of leadership is to keep the peace, restore calm and protect the viability of the community. This is a critical role performed by top ranking males and females in primates and humans. Here empathy and targeted helping are directed beyond the individual to the group's needs.

Empathy is a deep and robust trait in humans. We can rely on it and develop it. Pinker and Rivkin have recently demonstrated the dramatic decline in violence in most societies since 1200. We are connected as never before and show both empathy and targeted helping – even for those we have never met or seen.

**Empathy continues to evolve and emerge. We must encourage it wherever we can.**

## The Bell Curve of Empathy

Simon Baron-Cohen maps empathy on a bell curve and reviews current thinking on the behaviours, genetics, neurology and environment that help explain the frightening consequences of low empathy. He is well known for his work in Autism.



Neuroscience demonstrates reduced activity in the neural circuits for self-awareness and empathy in low empathy people. Genetics, hormones and environment play a role.

His Zero Negative includes borderlines, psychopaths and narcissists. Parts of the empathy circuits are inactive in all three. Psychopaths don't show emotional contagion and appear to enjoy the suffering of others – schadenfreude.

Asperger Syndrome and Autism are grouped as Zero positives. Both have inhibited empathy circuits and reduced emotional contagion. Asperger Syndrome may be associated with talent in systematising – seeing patterns in information.

Baron-Cohen emphasises the value of early secure attachment between parent and child (internal pot of gold) and proposes targeting the empathy circuits for development through **expression training**, oxytocin, role-play and perspective-taking. He provides little to illuminate high empathy.

## High Empathy

The leadership question: when our empathy circuits work and we pay attention to others, how do we get better? There is wide agreement that building self-awareness and impulse control along with empathy and wisdom can lead to much more effective leadership and a better world.

Enter Dan Siegel, one of the few biological voices on this side of the empathy curve. His triad of Presence (self mastery), Attunement (emotional/cognitive empathy) and Resonance (monitor and master dialogue) captures the fundamentals. Think of Resonance as the point at which the "I"s are dissolved into "WE". We synchronise in body (HRV), emotion (expressions) and mind (ideas).

Contemplative traditions, lead by Buddhism, have long advocated and rigorously practiced this approach.

Presence is built upon 10,000 hours plus of meditation, Attunement on decades of loving kindness and Resonance in rigorous intellectual debate.

This may be a second enlightenment. If the first was freedom to think, the second is caring about and skilfully helping fellow man and nature. Descartes liberated mind to conquer earth. Now we must reconnect to our emotions in order to repair the damage and live sustainably.

## Watch for Blind Spots

While a small percentage of people might have 'zero empathy', most of us have functional empathy circuits. These can be activated and strengthened through neurogenesis (new cells) and synaptogenesis (new connections). Often we do the opposite and shut them down. This is common in leadership and we must understand it.

De Waal proposes an **empathy portal** that can be open or closed. We keep this open for our inner circle but might be less inclined to care about the thief or the "other side".

Globally, women show more empathy than men. Men can be good at empathy but are quick to shut it down at the first sign of competition. Even the gentlest father relishes the brutal destruction of 'baddies' in a movie. **The empathy circuit is off.** We have just paid for, and enjoyed, a psychotic experience.

Meanwhile women, who show empathy more effectively, seem not to switch off - even for those who have acted unfairly.

There is clear evidence that alcohol, certain drugs, stress, depression and fatigue can all reduce empathy. Further, an episode of these can trigger the low empathy conditions described as zero empathy. Leaders, be vigilant to these effects!

Finally, the will to exert self-control, beyond all the good evidence for a better, happier and more successful life, leads to altruism. In short those with strong willpower act to make others' lives better. Baumeister argues that willpower evolved to help us live in community. Bottom line, eat regular meals – especially breakfast, sit up straight, exercise, sleep well, follow routines, plan monthly and save your will for important stuff – your community.

When reason and self-control combine with empathy we open the door to compassion. Compassion (targeted helping) is defined by:

- a. Attentive to needs & potential of others
- b. Skilfully helps others in need
- c. Contributes to communities outside of work
- d. Sought after to inspire recovery & growth

Compassion is thus active, considered and empathic. Presence, attunement and resonance are balanced and in flow. The engagement has a constructive outcome.

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## Power versus Compassion

Aggression, self-assertion and competition have sat uncomfortably with us. We feel we ought to banish these beastly traits to make way for humility and kindness. True, but we need balance. Power without compassion can lead to evil (Wall St). Compassion without power leads to sympathy and dependency (healthcare/welfare).

Primatologists tell of chimps in distress killing a chimp in difficulty (De Waal). Emotional contagion without

skilful help leads to injury or death. The dominant male or female will often sort the problem out with ease. They remain calm and effectively resolve the crisis with obvious skill.

Effective compassion (targeted helping) demands self-aware, calm, reasoned and skilful action. When power and compassion are well developed AND balanced we can embrace and engage with a wider community. This is powerful leadership.

The leaders inner circle widens to embrace not just family and friends but entire populations of staff and customers. When we evaluate the consequences of GFC events we uncover a very serious leadership failure. The challenges of our time demand much better leadership.

Resilience provides a framework to define the territory and guide leadership development.

COMPASSION	RESILIENCE	POWER
Conflict resolution	Spirit	Will to lead
Targeted helping	Mind	Willpower
Consolation	Emotion	Exploration
Contagion	Body	Survival

Using our **Resilience Diagnostic and Development model** we are able to define a more precise and developmentally robust model. Both power and compassion are rooted in our biological past – deep and robust traits of body and emotion. Humanity opens the door to developing mind and reason, inviting us to reach towards spirit.

We must advance on both fronts, embracing our evolutionary resources with self-awareness, impulse control, empathy, innovation and sound reason. We cannot deny our nature but we must advance steadily and skilfully toward self-realisation and compassionate action.

## Power & Compassion in action

At 4 our daughter cut her forehead wide open. Sue, in distress, held our bleeding daughter to her breast. Both were screaming and covered in blood (contagion plus consolation). Whilst alarming, calm effectiveness was required to still the panic and stem the bleeding with clinical skill (targeted helping). Sue is very competent yet in this specific situation, her emotional response overwhelmed her power to think. Targeted help failed.

SYMPATHY		INCOMPETENT
Consolation	Emotion	immobilised
Contagion	Body	Survival

This is the sympathy trap. Overwhelmed by our physical and emotional response to a situation we can easily make a situation worse for all parties.

Take a Partner facing withering 360-degree feedback. This is a highly motivated and competent professional with years of experience. She shouts and swears at staff. There are complaints; a grievance and division performance is down. Coaching uncovers trouble at home, health & sleep issues, and 360-degree anger.

CONFLICT		DEPLETION
Conflict Escalation	Spirit	Sadness
Manipulation (fear)	Mind	Resignation
Antipathy	Emotion	Rigidity
Contagion	Body	Survival

She is suffering along with everyone else. Perhaps there is an empathy deficit or the empathy portal is closed but clearly the mind is able to manipulate by taking other's perspective. This is coercive leadership. However, this partner get's her life better organised and the empathy portal spontaneously opens. She "wakes up", tunes in, apologises and puts in place new disciplines.

She is not evil but her depleted power has closed the empathy portal to save energy. Leadership becomes destructive (evil to others). A psychopath is similar but may be very powerful and has a permanently off empathy portal. The pain caused to others may be satisfying. It is possible that many leaders share elements of this pattern – manipulative, uncaring and self-aggrandising.

Finally, take the example of a GM of a successful company. He is a good at the business, smart and caring. But at this level, he comes into contact with the politics of leadership, power and territory. He discovers that other leaders do not walk the talk and actively undermine the success of others. This is painful. At the very top the battle for power is brutal – as is the battle for Alpha males status in all primate communities.

The question this leader faces is whether he has the will to lead – the courage to step up, fight for what he believes in and accept the responsibility. This is the spiritual challenge of leadership. It takes power to resolve the complex conflicts of society. The GM will have to choose to step up or exit. Business is not democratic.

Democracy has stalled dangerously. Leaders have failed to confront the fact that we cannot pay the bills. Voters – from banker to beneficiary – are so dependent on handouts that leadership is immobilised. How long will it take to realise that the freedom of democracy has become a vice. In our rush for votes, we have abandoned reason and mortgaged our grandchildren.

AVOIDANCE		DOUBT
Delay payment	Spirit	Popularity
Trade-offs	Mind	Media
Consolation	Emotion	Fear
Contagion	Body	Survival

The ideas are old and obvious but the science is new and emergent. We must think carefully and act skilfully as the future of those we love and lead depends on how well we accommodate these natural tensions and find a way to nurture the best of our potential for power and compassion.

Start at home and aim for powerful leadership. A secure family where we respect and nurture body, heart and mind. Self-development and skilful connection provide the base from which we can ascend to our potential. Parents need help, schools must embrace and test these ideas, and our nations must rigorously test and evaluate these initiatives. Our happiness, success and future depend on it.

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## References

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