

The Most Important Skill for Risk Leaders? Guess Again. . .



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“Almost all of us have some kind of communication problem that we don’t know we have.” – Alan Alda

I’ve just finished reading Alan Alda’s fascinating book, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* I’m feeling fortunate to have chosen this title to read on the heels of finishing *The Drama-Free Workplace: How You Can Prevent Unconscious Bias, Sexual Harassment, Ethics Lapses, and Inspire a Healthy Culture*, by Patti Perez. While Perez boldly explores the bad behaviors that lead to poor productivity and employment claims, Alda deftly investigates the “art and science of relating and communicating.”

Both books are chock full of interesting insights and memorable “ah-ha” moments. I’ll begin by giving you two of my favorites from Alda’s book:

- **How confidence (arrogance!) squelches cooperation and collaboration in relationships at home and in the office.** Alda explains: “There’s another great cooperation killer, the Sound of Certainty: the triumphant, but self-defeating, tone of voice that announces, I know what I’m talking about and that ends the discussion. It’s a tone that doesn’t invite the other person in, but instead, diminishes them to the rank of outsider.” Ouch. Have you ever confidently wrapped up a team meeting by declaring your subject-matter superiority?
- **Truly, it’s not you, it’s me—the terrible truth about employee terminations.** Alda writes, “Some of my limited experience as a boss has included the unpleasant task of firing people who, it suddenly turned out, were wrong for the job—that remarkable transformation where someone you thought was perfect has turned into a werewolf. They haven’t actually become something else, of course. They’re the same perfectly fine people they were months earlier. But with all of my supposed sensitivity and mind-reading ability, I hadn’t picked up on who they really were when I hired them.” It’s all too easy to blame a failed work relationship on the person being terminated; courageous leaders look within for the sometimes more painful but honest reasons the relationship faltered.

If You Guessed Empathy . . .

One of the powerful themes that I found especially relevant to the experience of a risk leader is the role of *empathy* in meaningful conversations. The backstory for the book is Alda’s quest to understand how scientists, educators, and medical professionals can radically improve how they communicate with listeners,

readers, students, and patients. Empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of another—is the key to connecting with other human beings. Given the fact that communication is a fundamental skill for risk leadership, learning to be more empathetic should be a personal goal for any leader who wants to make a difference in the organization they serve.

When we're empathetic, we recognize that telling someone something isn't the same as communicating. We accept ownership for delivering messages in terms our listeners understand, versus language that suits our understanding and experience. Jargon anyone? And when we're empathetic as risk leaders we resolve to truly feel and sense the impact of new rules, policies, and expectations related to safety and risk. We pause to ask:

- Will the compelling *why* behind this recommendation be felt and real to the people who will experience its inconvenient consequences?
- Have I thoughtfully sought feedback from the people I suspect will support—and strongly oppose—this change in policy or practice?
- Am I rushing to implement this change to suit my impatience to check a box, or have I considered the burden, frustration or even confusion the change may trigger?

The TEQ: Measuring Empathy

The very first article that drew my attention in my email inbox yesterday was titled “Google Can Spot Its Highest-Empathy Leaders in 5 Minutes With These 16 Questions.” In the piece, Scott Mautz explores how a digital age giant is using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire or TEQ as one tool in its quest to identify the most important traits in managers, and also raise awareness about empathy in its leadership ranks. The TEQ consists of a series of statements that invite scoring based on how certain workplace behaviors make you feel. Do you enjoy making people feel better? Are you irritated when someone cries? Higher scores on the TEQ indicate higher levels of self-reported empathy. Not that I'm keeping score, but according to one source, on average, male test takers have lower general scores (43.46 to 44.45) than females (44.62 to 48.93).

The TEQ questions and scoring rubric appear below. Upon taking the test myself, I was happy that my score was in the average range for my sex. But that isn't good enough. Reading the questions made me reflect on words of wisdom from another recent read: *Rethinking Reputational Risk*, by Anthony Fitzsimmons and Derek Atkins. The authors of that book remind us that, “Without stakeholders you could have no reputation, only self-esteem.” Do you suspect that you may be less empathetic than you would like to be, or than your team and your nonprofit's mission deserve?

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire Instructions

Below is a list of statements. Please read each statement *carefully* and rate how frequently you feel or act in the manner described. Circle your answer (0, 1, 2, 3 or 4) on the response form. There are no right or wrong answers or trick questions. Please answer each question as honestly as you can.

1. When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too.
2. Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal.
3. It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.
4. I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy.
5. I enjoy making other people feel better.
6. I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
7. When a friend starts to talk about his\her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else.
8. I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything.
9. I find that I am “in tune” with other people's moods.
10. I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses.
11. I become irritated when someone cries.
12. I am not really interested in how other people feel.
13. I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.
14. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them.
15. I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness.
16. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him\her.

Use the following scoring scale for positively worded items: (questions 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 16). Never = 0; Rarely = 1; Sometimes = 2; Often = 3; Always = 4.

Use the following, reverse-scored scale for negatively worded items: (questions 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15). Never = 4; Rarely = 3; Sometimes = 2; Often = 1; Always = 4.

Add up your scores for all questions to calculate a total score on the TEQ.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions and comments about risk leadership skills and traits, or questions about the mission, programs, and services of NRMCC. Contact Melanie at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.

Resources:

- “Sick of Power Plays? Manage Workplace Power Plays & Revenge Risk,” [www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/e-news/sick-power-plays-manage-workplace-power-plays-revenge-risk/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/e-news/sick-power-plays-manage-workplace-power-plays-revenge-risk/)
- The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2775495/>
- “Google Can Spot Its Highest-Empathy Leaders In 5 Minutes With These 16 Questions,” by Scott Mautz, <https://www.inc.com/scott-mautz/google-can-spot-its-highest-empathy-leaders-in-5-minutes-with-these-16-questions.html>
- “How Empathetic are You?” <http://emotivity.my/wp-content/uploads/How-Empathetic-are-You-The-Toronto-Empathy-Questionnaire-TEQ.pdf>