Empathy at the Core

By Carol Elliott | Spring 2017

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Chris Adkins, a longtime educator in business ethics, discusses why empathy is an essential leadership skill.

Sit down to talk with Chris Adkins about the topic of empathy for an hour, and he will deftly weave together a story of his personal career, Kierkegaard, neuroscience, mysticism, leadership, and his plans for the Notre Dame Deloitte Center for Ethical Leadership — all along one unifying theme of how curiosity and a willingness to listen deeply opens one's life and career.

And it all starts with a harmonica.

As a kid, Adkins, executive director of the Deloitte Center since July, figured out he learned best by listening. He found it hard to take notes in school, but if he listened deeply, he could remember conversations vividly. "It was all about deep focus on what someone is saying, what they said and how they said it," he explains. "I could remember not only the ideas, but the person sharing the ideas."

By high school, Adkins — a piano-lesson dropout who loved music — was a burgeoning blues enthusiast thinking of joining a band. But what instrument?

"The harmonica was a great choice because it was something I could afford," he says. "I couldn't really take lessons; there was nobody to teach me. And if I never learned how to do it, I could put it in the drawer and never see it again. So I got a harmonica and a book and some blues records and taught myself by ear."

Again, the core idea of listening and observing became critical. When Adkins joined a band, he realized he needed to be attuned continually to the rhythms and keys of other musicians — to pay attention to the key and chord changes, to figure out what to play and when to play to complement the other musicians. And perhaps just as important, when not to play.

"Sometimes the best thing you can do is be quiet, listen and wait for the moment when you can contribute," he says. "This realization eventually shaped the way I think about how leaders create value."

As Adkins went on to college, his curiosity of how others made sense of the world led him to pursue courses in philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology and literature. These explorations were the beginning of his study of a concept that he views as a critical skill for business leaders — empathy, which he defines very straightforwardly as “seeing and feeling as another.”

It sounds simple enough, but as Adkins spins out the definition in an organizational context, he adds layers of neuroscience, psychology and morality to arrive at an intriguing concept that at once integrates a person’s values, background and motivations.

As an undergraduate at The College of William & Mary, Adkins majored in religion and philosophy, and later completed his master’s in philosophy at Boston University. He returned to William & Mary to teach ethics to business undergraduates and eventually began teaching executive education courses. It was this work that showed him how hungry business leaders are for ideas about how to voice their values at work. And, beyond that, to live their values at work and let those values meaningfully guide their leadership.

At the same time, Adkins began his Ph.D. in education at William & Mary, with a focus on courses in psychology and neuroscience. His doctoral work and teaching experience converged on a simple question: Why do we often fail to choose what’s “good,” or fail to voice our values, even when we know what’s right?

This is when he discovered that empathy might be the missing link in ethics and leadership. In reading the work of neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux, Adkins learned that we can think of our brain as a “mental trilogy” of processes — cognition, emotion and motivation, or simply thinking, feeling and wanting. He saw that so much of ethics and leadership focused on thinking, on analysis, but failed to integrate emotions and motivations in how we make decisions.

Empathy offered a way to include all three parts of the mental trilogy, helping us think and feel as another person. In focusing on another’s experience, we often are motivated to help others. Here is where Adkins finds it essential to define and distinguish empathy from similar concepts, such as sympathy and compassion. “In discussing empathy as ‘seeing and feeling as another,’ I often focus on the words ‘seeing’ and ‘as,’” says Adkins. “As” indicates that an empathetic response isn’t simply sympathy — feeling for someone. It also isn’t compassion — feeling with someone. Empathy means feeling as someone and thinking as someone.

The word “seeing” is also important because it focuses on imagining another’s experience.

“Empathy involves your imagination, seeing another and their world, in your mind’s eye,” he says. “Can you actually walk into their world and see what they see, hear what they hear?”

Further, when we empathize with the experience of another, it often motivates helping behavior. Referring to the work of social psychologist Dan Batson, Adkins explains that seeing another in need and experiencing their situation can spark altruistic responses. And neuroscience research suggests that our brains are wired to develop empathy in our interactions with others.

But returning to the C-suite, why should executives care about any of this?

“When I speak to executives, I propose that if you were to focus on only one skill that would positively impact so many different areas of performance for your leaders and your employees, it would be empathy,” says Adkins.

Empathy facilitates communication with different audiences; it enables a leader to be able to understand where employees, customers and clients are coming from, what they know, feel and want, and vice versa. Empathy can bridge the gap between diverse perspectives, which builds understanding and trust, which in turn is likely to increase information sharing. Such trust and sharing not only is the foundation for relationships, but it can spark innovation as we see the world through another’s eyes.

“If you develop empathy, it not only makes you better at work, it makes you better at home, with your family and friends,” says Adkins. “You can think of empathy as a core muscle that will make you better with every part of your life. That message tends to resonate with people because personal and professional lives are so overlapping. Also, we know that so much of what keeps us going is not the intellectual side, it’s the heart. This is a way of fusing the two together.”

One of the last points Adkins makes is that empathy takes training. “High-level executives have so many stakeholders,” he says. “I have a way of teaching called empathic stakeholder analysis, where we analyze the needs of various groups and what they value, as well as how their needs relate. We zoom in to understand the perspectives and needs of each stakeholder, and then zoom out to understand the relationships across the stakeholders, and where we might create shared value. This approach also helps us identify blind spots and where to build bridges.”

This view may run counter to the popular concept of the rockstar CEO, who confidently drives a company forward according to his or her vision. But Adkins hearkens back to an older leadership characterization — walking the factory floor.

“Empathy is another way of saying you’re deeply curious. Every person you meet is an opportunity to learn, to expand the way you look at the world,” he says. “You see things you never saw before, and this is simultaneously humbling and empowering. You realize in a powerful way that we have so much to learn from each other.”