

Empathy in the Foundations of Warfare

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In letters to Airmen and changes to evaluation practices, and in the development of Airman leadership qualities, Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Charles Q. Brown Jr. and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass have charged Airmen to cultivate empathetic communication. Yet a gap exists between service doctrine concerning empathy and its practice through specific behavioral skills. Using a recent study, this article connects a learnable and teachable practice of empathy to improving Airmen's professional and personal lives. Learning and applying empathetic communication to the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war prepare Airmen for the fast-paced and dynamic contexts of future complex warfare.

War, a complex, multifaceted continuum, consists of many foundational components, both explicit in doctrine and implicit in the large body of work dedicated to understanding how to conduct combat. Yet while comprehensive, the United States Air Force's current framework for future complex warfare lacks a foundation in empathetic behavior. As an ever-modernizing force in the profession of arms, the service must fill the gap between empathy in doctrine and empathy in practice as Airmen prepare for and execute future warfare. Building empathy into the foundation of warfare is important for two reasons. First, learning empathetic behavioral skills will improve relationship building in Airmen's personal and professional lives. Second, an enhanced capacity for empathy is a skill that will be required of Airmen in future complex war.

Understanding and applying empathy pertains to many audiences, from individual Airmen as practitioners, to content developers for resiliency programming, to Air Force senior leaders interested in driving cultural change. Small teams and individual leaders may already be implementing empathetic communication, the practice of interacting with others with an awareness and understanding of their feelings and perspectives. But such an important skill should be more commonly taught, learned, and practiced in the service.

The significance of empathetic communication is demonstrated through a 2022 qualitative research study involving members of the Michigan Air National Guard. The study's findings on reflective listening—a technique used in empathetic communication that involves understanding the speaker and reflecting this understanding back to them—reveal several insights into the benefits of this kind of communication, the

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potential gap between current Air Force doctrine and the practice of empathy, and the importance of the methods used to train personnel.¹

While empathetic communication, which includes reflective listening, requires awareness of the situational context, teaching, learning, and practicing this skill could enable effective interpersonal relationship interactions before and when Airmen enter high-stress, high-tempo, and high-visibility situations that require much different communication styles.

The Roots of Empathy in Warfare

Although empathy may seem to run counter to the conduct of war, it is an enduring and universal concept with roots in ancient warfare. Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu clearly understood the importance of empathy, writing “know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered.”² Sun Tzu’s idea of knowing oneself applies to the leader, the troops, and the allies. Moreover, he advises this is half the equation to battlefield success.³ Successful leaders use their foundation in empathy to know those who serve with, above, and for them to plan and execute war and achieve their missions.

Empathy has many definitions arising from its multidisciplinary use and application. This article is grounded in the military concept of empathy, which the Air Force defines as being “understanding of and sensitive to another person’s feelings, thoughts, and experiences to the point that you can almost feel or experience them yourself.”⁴ This cognitive awareness is the first part of developing a behavioral response to demonstrate empathy toward others, particularly in empathetic communication and relationships.

The connection between empathy in doctrine and empathy in practice existed in previous versions of leadership manuals, even if the service did not explicitly invoke the word itself. The first Air Force leadership manual distinctive from the Army is one such example.⁵ The 1948 version of the Air Force Manual 35-15 *Air Force Leadership* states, “To learn [the Airmen’s] individual differences and characteristics together with the common desires and aspirations, you must spend much time with them,” and “concern for, and assistance with, the personal problems of your men will permit you to know them and will give them recognition.”⁶

1. Jennifer Lee C. Rudolph, “Tell Me More: A Qualitative, Bounded Case Study on Reflective Listening” (master’s thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2022).

2. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 129.

3. Sun Tzu, 129.

4. Department of the Air Force (DAF), *DAF Air Force Handbook (AFH) 1* (Washington, DC: DAF, October 1, 2017), 256, <https://books.google.com/>.

5. Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education (LeMay Center), *Volume II: Leadership* (Maxwell AFB, AL: LeMay Center, November 4, 2011), 34, <https://www3.nd.edu/>.

6. DAF, *Air Force Leadership*, AFM 35-15 (Washington, DC: DAF, December 1948), 22-23, <https://books.google.com/>.

Yet although Air Force doctrine has contained references to empathy since 1948, even in the updated 2021 version of the *Airman's Handbook*, the word itself occurs infrequently.⁷ Interestingly, “empathic” communication is “useful when communication is emotional or when the relationship between speaker and listener is just as important as the message,” yet somewhat contradictorily, it is the prerequisite to informational or critical listening, the two other types of listening described previously in the document.⁸ A junior Airman understandably may view empathic listening as less important as the other two types of listening. The *Airman's Handbook* could thus benefit from emphasizing and explicitly connecting behavior that demonstrates empathy to solidify this foundation.

One way to break down empathy is through a behavior such as reflective listening. Table 1 provides examples of five reflective listening skills. Reflective listening is a multi-dimensional skill that enables empathy through attentive behaviors, verbal and nonverbal acknowledgments, phrases to encourage other-centered conversation, silence, and reflective responses to validate understanding.

These specific behavioral skills are learnable and teachable for Airmen at all levels, but behavioral change is not always easy, nor does it occur without creating new habits. Importantly, the term reflective listening is preferred over the term active listening. Whereas active listening requires a response from the listener, reflective listening, in the ways and for the reasons described above, distinguishes and emphasizes repeating and validating the message received in the communication cycle.

Table 1. Reflective listening examples⁹

Behavior	Definition	Example
Attending verbal/nonverbal	Being fully present through posture, gestures, and attention	Eye contact, open body posture, nodding, leaning forward, giving full attention, being present within
Acknowledgments	Verbal and nonverbal communication that assures attention	Verbal: “uh-huh,” “really,” “no kidding!,” “that’s interesting...,” “yes, I see...” Non-verbal: head nods, expressive eyes
Door openers	Other-centered conversation that encourages the other to talk (not filling the listener’s need for information)	“Go on...” “tell me more...” “sounds like you have something to say...” “talk more about it!” “Share more about that...” “I’m listening...”

7. DAF, *Airman AFH 1* (Washington, DC: DAF, November 1, 2021), 319–20, <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

8. DAF, *Airman*, 2021, 320.

9. Adapted from Rudolph, “Tell Me More,” 3, table 1; Chapman Foundation for Caring Communities, *Our Community Listens* training (St. Louis, MO: Chapman Foundation., n. d., accessed March 20, 2023); and see also “Learn to Connect,” Chapman Foundation for Caring Communities (website), accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.chapmancommunities.org/>.

Behavior	Definition	Example
Silence	Quieting the mind and the voice	Being silent internally and externally
Reflective responses	Conveying understanding facts and feelings to the other as experienced by the other (not inattention, parroting, or paraphrasing)	<p>“Sounds to me like...[facts and feelings of the other]”</p> <p>“What I hear you saying is...[facts and feelings]”</p> <p>“It seems like you are [a feeling word] about [the factor or issue]...”</p>

Empathy across Levels of War

The levels of warfare as defined in Joint doctrine are useful to explore the ways empathy could impact Airmen.¹⁰ Figure 1 depicts how leaders can use empathy as they execute their missions. The applications of empathy at each level listed below are not all-inclusive, and the building-block approach demonstrates that empathetic communication skills can reinforce leadership and relationships at higher levels.

While strategic or operational leaders may have a different focus at the national or campaign level, they rely on their tactical empathetic communication skills to develop their teams and workplace cultures. As the sections below demonstrate, the notion of empathy can be found explicitly or implicitly in service and Joint doctrine, but a gap in implementing successful programs, at least throughout the Air Force, provides opportunities to learn and teach behavioral skills in empathetic communication.

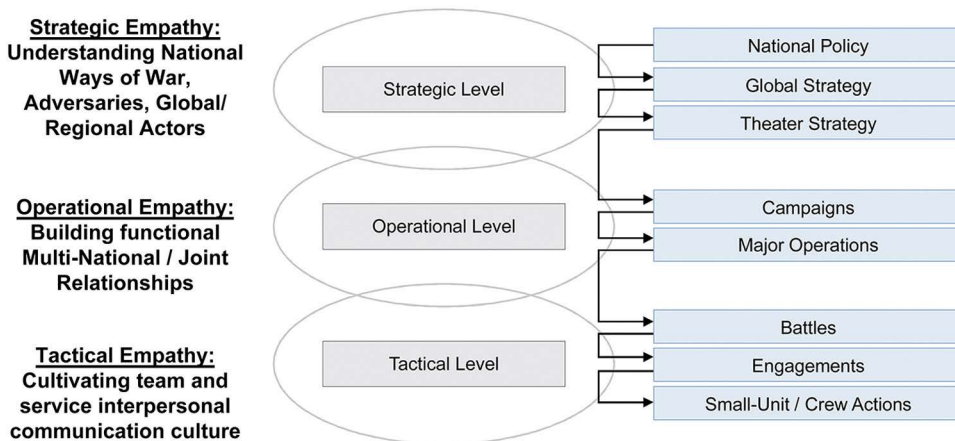


Figure 1. Levels of empathy aligned with levels of leadership

10. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication (JP) 1 (Washington, DC: CJCS, Incorporating Change 1, July 12, 2017), 1-7, <https://irp.fas.org/>.

Tactical

In the tactical level of war, “battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units or joint task forces.”¹¹ Here, empathy can arise in the context of the interaction of members on small teams. Empathy may also emerge in interactions between members of a particular military service’s culture or between US military service cultures.

Disciplines such as negotiations and psychology employ the concept of tactical empathy. For example, scholars of negotiation have defined tactical empathy as related to accurately understanding and communicating “the emotional obstacles and potential pathways to getting an agreement done.”¹² But empathy at the tactical level is not found in common parlance in the military.

As indicated above, the Air Force does address empathy in doctrine and leadership principles.¹³ The service’s recently revised “Brown Book” is the “foundation for the enlisted force to meet mission requirements and individual Airman proficiency and competency development.”¹⁴ Desired leader qualities that help gain respect intentionally include empathy: “credibility, a positive influence on others’ self-awareness, cultural awareness, and *empathy* [emphasis added].”¹⁵

Joint doctrine also discusses the importance of empathy at the tactical level. In the Joint Staff publication *Developing Enlisted Leaders for War*, emotional intellect is defined as “having keen self-awareness with the ability to connect, empathize, and understand people and cultures.”¹⁶ This form of empathy is internal—an individually developed quality—and is required within a military organization to accomplish mission success.

Operational

The operational level “links strategy and tactics by establishing operational objectives needed to achieve the military end states and strategic objectives.”¹⁷ Operational empathy can include building relationships with multinational Allies and partners and between

11. CJCS, JP 1, I-8.

12. Chris Voss and Tahl Raz, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as If Your Life Depended on It*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Business, 2016), 73.

13. Department of the Army (DA), *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: DA, July 2019), 46, 50, <https://armypubs.army.mil/>; Department of the Navy (DoN), *Navy Leader Development Framework: Version 3.0* (Annapolis, MD: DoN, May 2019), 7, 10–11, <https://media.defense.gov/>; and Headquarters US Marine Corps (USMC), *Leading Marines*, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6-11 (Washington, DC: Headquarters USMC, November 27, 2002), 31, 69, 96–99, <https://www.marines.mil/>.

14. USAF, *The Enlisted Force Structure* (“Brown Book”) (Washington, DC: DAF, May 16, 2022), 3, <https://www.dctrine.af.mil/>.

15. USAF, *Enlisted Force Structure*, 8.

16. CJCS, *Developing Enlisted Leaders for Tomorrow’s Wars* (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2001), 2, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

17. CJCS, JP 1, I-8.

military services. As a NATO report recommends, “the motivation to understand and be understood . . . can create positive attitudes toward other cultures, empathy, and social relaxation, all of which will aid communication.”¹⁸ Operational empathy is a lateral empathy necessary to accomplish military goals with Joint and multinational partners and Allies.

Strategic

Strategic empathy is about understanding global actors—adversary or neutral—and includes concepts like national ways of war and “strategic objectives in support of strategic end states.”¹⁹ One scholar defines strategic empathy as “stepping out of our own heads and into the minds of others. It is what allows us to pinpoint what truly drives and constrains the other side.”²⁰ Strategic empathy is external empathy required to accurately understand the meaning of what global or regional actors and nations do. Operational and strategic levels of leadership as described above require a foundation in empathy, a skill which can be learned and taught, as demonstrated in the empathy study discussed below.

These tactical, operational, and strategic frameworks create the foundation for examining empathy doctrinally. The next challenge is how to learn it and teach it to Airmen. The results from a 2022 qualitative bounded case study conducted at the US Army’s Command and General Staff College provide valuable insights into this process.²¹

Empathy Study

People represent the first priority for most every Air Force commander. While empathy is critical for teams, problem-solving, and organizational relationships, empathy is just as, if not more, important for what it can do for the professional and personal development of Airmen in the service’s span of care. Indeed, this critical component of emotional intelligence that meaningfully shapes familial relationship support can be considered one important predictive element of career success.²²

Between 2017 and 2022, approximately 110 Airmen—4 percent of the Michigan Air National Guard—attended a three-day empathetic communications course offered by a

18. NATO and Research and Technology Organisation (RTO), *Multinational Military Operations and Intercultural Factors*, RTO Technical Report, TR-HFM-120 (Neuilly-sur-Seine Cedex, France: NATO Research & Technology Organisation, November 2008), 6-14–6-15.

19. CJCS, JP 1, I-7.

20. Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High Stakes History of Reading Your Rival’s Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

21. Rudolph, “Tell Me More.”

22. Itziar Urquijo, Natalio Extremera, and Garazi Azanza, “The Contribution of Emotional Intelligence to Career Success: Beyond Personality Traits,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 23 (November 2019), <https://www.mdpi.com/>; and Lesley Verhofstadt et al., “The Role of Cognitive and Affective Empathy in Spouses’ Support Interactions: An Observational Study,” *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 12 (February 2016), <https://doi.org/>.

third-party nonprofit organization, Our Community Listens. The in-person course sought to teach Airmen specific behavioral skills to demonstrate empathy and provide a framework for effective confrontation.

For the March 2022 study, members of the Michigan Air National Guard who had attended the course shared their experiences, including what learning reflective listening was like, how their reflective listening behavior changed, how reflective listening impacted their demonstration of empathy, how their military work environment changed, and how reflective listening met or did not meet their expectations. The participants provided examples where they used reflective listening or experiences they wanted to share.

Ultimately, their reflective listening yielded a more accurate understanding of others, enabling them to demonstrate perspective taking, or seeing the other person's point of view. When the participants avoided problem-solving as their first response, they realized that reflective listening often provided new and more complete information upon which to make follow-on decisions within their interpersonal interactions. Then, during an other-centered conversation, they found the new information allowed them to conceptualize more effective or different solutions than they had initially envisioned at the outset of the conversation.

Study participants' experiences with reflective listening provided insights into when, where, why, and how Airmen used reflective listening. The semistructured interviews and subsequent cycles of coding revealed relevant themes. One significant insight that emerged from this research is that empathy is a skill that can be taught and learned.

First, facilitators presented common behaviors that might seem like connecting with others: asking questions to satisfy personal curiosity or a need for information, telling one's own story, and giving advice. Although such behaviors appear to promote empathy, they tend to focus the conversation on the listener's needs and not the speaker's. The potential issue is making the conversation self-centered (listener) instead of other-centered (speaker), which is the aim of empathetic communication. Second, the facilitators presented the alternative behaviors surrounding reflective listening, such as attending verbal/nonverbal behavior, and offering attention acknowledgments, door openers, silence, and reflective responses (see table 1).

During the next portion of the course, participants split into small groups for role-playing scenarios to practice the behaviors, while facilitators provided feedback that could demonstrate empathy and put the conversation back in the other person's hands. This experience of learning a behavioral skill and practicing with facilitator feedback led members on a journey experimenting with self-regulating their behavior when listening to others.

At the end of the day, facilitators encouraged participants to practice and experiment with reflective listening with someone in their span of care. Based on end-of-course surveys, reflective listening significantly impacted members during the course. In three sequential iterations of the course, 100 percent of participants identified reflective listening as the most important skill in the course, and 62 percent reported that reflective listening was the skill they made a personal commitment to adopt.

Learning an individual behavioral skill such as reflective listening thus develops a foundation in empathy, creating a practice that an Airman in a leadership position can incorporate while serving at any tactical, operational, or strategic level. This other-centered finding supports the Airmen leadership qualities and foundational competencies found in the Brown Book.²³ Figure 2 situates tactical, operational, and strategic empathy with the leadership performance and developmental areas. The continuum of development implies that qualities and competencies learned at the foundational level contribute to and enhance the advanced level. Training transfer, therefore, is an important component of building a foundation of empathy in warfare.

In the study discussed, participants described transferring their skills from the training environment to various other aspects of their life. They also transferred empathetic communication skills from the classroom to their military and civilian workplaces. Applying these skills outside of a military setting is particularly important to members of the National Guard, who must continuously navigate between military and civilian spheres.

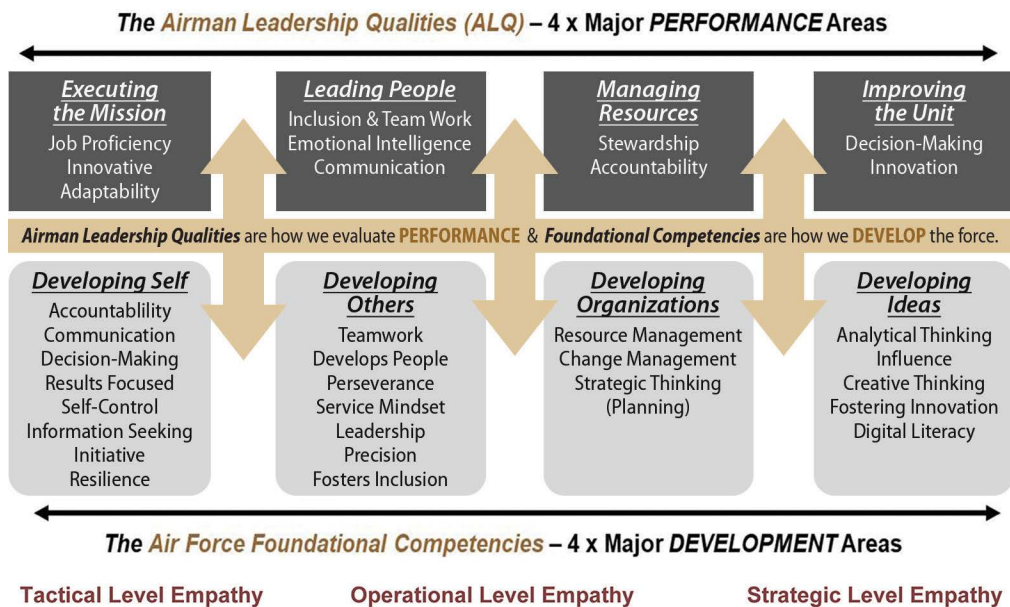


Figure 2. Levels of empathy coupled with the Airmen leadership qualities and Air Force foundational competencies

Reflective listening as a behavioral skill for empathy, therefore, has the potential to impact many different areas of an Airman’s personal and professional life. This impact suggests there could be other areas where practicing reflective listening in empathetic

23. USAF, *Enlisted Force Structure*, 23.

communication at the tactical level could be applied, namely to the operational and strategic levels of warfare, creating the empathetic, self-aware, and other-aware Airmen needed for future complex warfare.

Findings and Recommendations

Benefits of Empathy

The participants in the study discussed above became empathy practitioners in their most valued relationships: they demonstrated empathy to the people in their span of care—their coworkers, their families, and their children, and members of their community. Study participants listened when a coworker experienced a death in the family, they released themselves from the burden of solving others' problems, and they had a common language to explain their feelings to their spouses and families. Moreover, participants reported they found others responded by communicating freely in ways that were different than before.

Gap between Doctrine and Practice

Clearly, the time is right to pivot toward including specific behavioral skills for empathy in Air Force resiliency programs, Airmen and family readiness resources, and base- and wing-level programs. Air Force Chief of Staff General Charles Q. Brown Jr. and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass called for empathetic communication in a 2022 memorandum, acknowledging it as a continuous practice and stating that “building trust and belonging is never a one-time event—it is a *daily commitment to those we serve* [italics in original].”²⁴

The roots of empathy exist in their ideas to start connecting and engaging with Airmen, such as “shar[ing] perspectives and life lessons.” In their directive, CSAF Brown and CMSAF Bass call on Air Force leaders to purposefully incorporate empathy in their interactions: “It must be intentional at every level to create trust and belonging. During these moments, we will continue to be open, show consideration, value differences, and seek to understand multiple perspectives.”²⁵ In order to ensure a daily, long-term practice, the implementation of empathetic communication training must be intentional and consistent.

Teaching and Learning Empathy—Reflective Listening

The study of empathy in the foundations of warfare offers opportunities to further determine and refine how and when empathy can develop Airmen of the future. The Department of the Air Force can benefit from a targeted look into the many current

24. Charles Q. Brown Jr. and JoAnne S. Bass, “Airmen’s Time,” memorandum (Washington, DC: DAF, April 2, 2022), <https://www.resilience.af.mil/>.

25. Brown and Bass, “Airmen’s Time.”

communication courses such as Our Community Listens for ways to implement empathy training. Empathy is a challenging area of interpersonal communication, one that takes personal practice, trial and error, experimentation, and self-regulation of emotion—all added to the current burdens of communication and leadership during today's fast-paced environment. Now is the time to provide tangible, effective training to Airmen at all levels and at all points of their careers to create or reinforce their empathy foundations.

As the Michigan Air National Guard study revealed, reflective listening is one method of teaching empathetic communication. In the 1970s, psychologist Carl Rogers first explored engaging in reflective listening during psychotherapy sessions where he highlighted the importance of validating communicated feelings as both received and understood as the individual has intended.²⁶ This other-oriented conversation forms the foundation of Rogers' contributions to the field, which extend far beyond psychotherapy and can be traced from his concepts of reflective listening and active listening to many interpersonal and leadership concepts today.

Deconstructing empathy into a behavioral skill is equally as important as the methodology of the training. Participants observed that Our Community Listens was different and unique in concept and practice from other communications training they experienced.

First, members felt attending a communications course focused on listening instead of speaking differed from their previous communication training experiences. Practicing the skill in class with instructor feedback went beyond lecture-style training on leadership concepts, creating a motivational effect among members. Finally, the continuous-learning framework of Our Community Listens facilitated empathetic behavioral skills after the course was over. These insights inform three recommendations for nearly any kind of training the Air Force pursues but are particularly important for teaching empathy.

Recommendations for Empathy Training

Combined Adult Learning Model

During the course, members experienced a combination of interactive and experiential learning when they learned, practiced, and experimented with reflective listening. This combination is the key aspect of successful adult learning models.²⁷ A combined approach to empathy training could engage the three adult learning theories identified by the US Department of Education's Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy: 1) engaging andragogy—the art and science of adult learning—to explain why learning empathy is important in a personal and professional context and reinforcing empathy learning with

26. Erik Rautalinko and Hans-Olof Lisper, "Effects of Training Reflective Listening in a Corporate Setting," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 18, no. 3 (March 2004), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

27. Cynthia Benn Tweedell, "A Theory of Adult Learning and Implications for Practice," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, October 25–28, 2000, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/>.

skills and feedback; 2) providing a framework for self-directed learning to allow the member to choose what empathy skills to incorporate and how to incorporate them in their daily life; and 3) including concepts from transformational learning to create an environment that encourages learners to explore multiple points of view.²⁸

Opportunities to Practice and Experiment

Applying a new perspective to listening means forming new habits. Study participants felt this application of empathy was unnatural at first, because in order to wait patiently and listen reflectively, they had to self-regulate preexisting, entrenched habits. Participants also often felt as though the speaker did not anticipate an other-centered conversation, perceiving that strangers and family members alike were expecting different behaviors from them. Evolving their reflective listening and empathy to a new normal came after practice and feedback both inside and outside the classroom. More interestingly, when participants learned reflective listening and adopted empathy, they felt responsible for demonstrating empathy themselves and became aware of it—or the lack thereof—in others.

As one participant described it, rather than a leadership course providing a to-do list of qualities, Our Community Listens more closely resembled an athletic practice, requiring conditioning in its method of implementing empathy through tangible skills such as reflective listening. An Airman training for an annual fitness test breaks down each event and practices toward the components for the comprehensive assessment. Throughout this process, an Airman practices, self-evaluates, practices again, improves, and continues to practice until the test. This athletic conditioning analogy emphasizes the need to learn how to demonstrate empathy using effective techniques with facilitator feedback as a part of an intentional leadership practice and not just a part of leadership philosophy.

Developing habits and increased proficiency with empathy comes from “reps and sets” through continuous learning for accountability, practice, and feedback. The continuous-learning mindset transforms empathy from an achievable static end state into an infinite goal. To borrow from a business analogy, empathy is a game with an “infinite time horizon” and with “no finish lines” and “no winning.”²⁹ One practices empathy continuously to understand and to seek to be understood.

Small Teams for Follow-Through

One way to encourage continuous learning in the so-called infinite game of empathy is through a small-team approach. In the study, many members struggled to remember the details of the course because it had been two months to four years since they had attended the course. Furthermore, members felt individually stuck with the burden of driving

28. Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy Center, “Adult Learning Theories Factsheet No. 11: Adult Learning Theories” (Washington, DC: US Department of Education Literacy Information and Communication System, 2011), <https://lincs.ed.gov/>.

29. Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 1st ed. (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), 3–4.

change in a workplace context if they did not have others around with the same common experience and language.

The Air Force should therefore approach continuous learning for empathy from a small-team mindset to provide daily interaction opportunities. As far as can be determined, no program taught throughout the Department of the Air Force relies on an adult learning model to teach and learn empathetic behavioral skills that includes continuous learning and emphasizes small teams.

Empathy in Future Complex War

Practicing empathy in future complex war reinforces strong organizations, effective Joint and multinational partnerships, and accurate assessments of global and regional actors during conflict at the levels of tactics, operations, and strategy. Furthermore, empathy skills enable Airmen to have better relationships at home, at work, and in their communities. The Air Force needs empathetic Airmen, both professionally and personally.

Empathy helps individuals achieve goals and accomplish the mission by providing tools to avoid or manage conflict, sort out messages received versus messages intended, and understand seemingly foreign work center cultures. Operational empathy assists in understanding other perspectives, including those of the sister services and US Allies and partners. Strategic empathy offers the opportunity to consider the values and motives of regional and global actors in better analyzing the appropriate allocation of resources—human and materiel alike—to warfare.

Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-19, *Competition Continuum*, explicitly calls for empathy in relationships with Allies, partners, neutrals, and adversaries during campaigning through cooperation, which is defined as an enduring, continuous activity to maintain policy goals.³⁰ Accordingly, not only is empathy a required skill for personal relationships and multinational operations, but it is also critical to one of the three elements of the competition continuum.

Competition Continuum further explains that if done well, the resulting relationships can yield immediate tactical or operational benefits, and enduring benefits, such as an increased commitment of a foreign military to the rule of law or a greater willingness to assist US efforts in a crisis. Though the immediate benefits of cooperative relationships are not always apparent, history demonstrates long-term relationships can pay dividends in unanticipated ways.³¹

30. CJCS, *Competition Continuum*, Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-19 (Washington, DC: CJCS, June 3, 2019), 7, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

31. CJCS, JDN 1-19, 7.

When Empathy Goes Wrong

In the interest of a balanced discussion on empathy, it is necessary to review a few considerations of reflective listening and empathetic communication for Allies, partners, and adversaries, including ethical and moral intent, over-identification, and potential perception of misalignment between empathy and military responsibilities. Even the most well-intended empathetic communication can miss the mark in an inappropriate context, requiring the Air Force to consider deeply the function of empathy in warfare.

First, the service must teach Airmen at all levels to harness empathy for the moral good. It is critical to acknowledge the potential that a person could abuse tactical empathy for manipulative purposes. Some scholars have defined tactical empathy as the connection between “seduction, deception, manipulation, and violent intent,” arguing that such empathy can lead to identifying with but also “othering” individuals to dehumanize them.³² This views the term tactical through a negative lens, which is contrary to the definition of the term used herein.

Other scholars discuss that while most humans can choose to be empathetic, the intent and situational context can lead to overwhelming others, trying to control others or the world, or even empathizing differently between peer managers and employees.³³ Incorporating empathy will require defining the moral boundaries associated with its application. Future discussions on morals should thus begin with learning empathy to connect with Airmen, build relationships with Allies and partners, and accurately assess adversaries.

Second, practicing empathy without care has a wide range of possibilities. It can be as innocuous as leaving a negative review on a travel website or it can be more nefarious as a tool for people with psychopathic tendencies to understand and then manipulate others.³⁴ Future concepts should explore the balance of teaching empathy to enable organizations while simultaneously understanding the potential risk at overidentifying with adversaries or empathizing but misunderstanding the message.

Finally, empathy can seem contradictory to military responsibilities. This misalignment can manifest as vulnerability for both the listener and the person being reflectively listened to. First, the person listening might have legal or ethical considerations for the information shared, such as a supervisor who is tasked with the mandatory reporting of

32. Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev, “The Dark Side of Empathy: Mimesis, Deception, and the Magic of Alterity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 1 (January 6, 2015), <https://www.cambridge.org/>.

33. Marc J. Schabracq and Iva Embley Smit, “Leadership and Ethics: The Darker Side of Management,” in *Research Companion to the Dysfunctional Workplace: Management Challenges and Symptoms*, ed. Janice Langan-Fox, Cary L. Cooper, and Richard J. Klimoski (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2007), 118.

34. Rebecca Pera et al., “When Empathy Prevents Negative Reviewing Behavior,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 75 (March 2019), <https://doi.org/>; Robert I. Simon, *Bad Men Do What Good Men Dream: A Forensic Psychiatrist Illuminates the Darker Side of Human Behavior*, 1st ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publications, 2008), 22; and Sara Konrath et al., “The Relationship between Narcissistic Exploitativeness, Dispositional Empathy, and Emotion Recognition Abilities,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 38, no. 1 (March 2014), <https://doi.org/>.

an employee's sexual assault. Second, the person being reflectively listened to needs to decide on the appropriate boundary for oversharing. For this consideration in particular, the service needs to deliberately explore and practice the nuances of empathetic communication for the military practitioner to help Airmen successfully navigate their empathy practice and their military responsibilities.

Conclusion

The Air Force must look at applying empathy to the levels of warfare to better inculcate a foundational, building-block approach. If empathy helps individual Airmen understand others in personal and professional relationships, it is possible to transfer the skill to Joint and multinational partnerships at the operational level. As a lifelong practice, it can encourage a more thorough and accurate assessment of strategic actors to understand complex, strategic problems. This is within the Air Force's power to achieve. First, the service should incorporate empathy as a learnable and teachable skill that develops leaders capable of future complex warfare. Second, the service should break down empathy into behavioral skills, such as reflective listening, learned at the small-team level with continuous learning for reinforcement, feedback, and accountability. Third, the Air Force should teach the skill using adult learning models that provide practice, experimentation, and feedback.

Consider the fast-paced, overwhelmingly tech-enabled environment of today and imagine a world where the service teaches empathy through behavioral skills, providing an antidote to not feeling heard. As the Brown Book describes, empathy is the catalyst for relationships built on respect, trust, inclusion, and self-accountability for the impact of one's actions on others, and these relationships are what define Airmanship.³⁵ Imagine a future Air Force where Airmanship is knowing oneself, one's behaviors, and others through empathy—where the infinite game of empathetic communication sharpens the spear of warfare. What would Sun Tzu think of such a force? → ✨

35. USAF, *Enlisted Force Structure*, 7.

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