

Design thinking and empathy generation



By [Robert Bloom and Katherine Train](#)

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Empathy generation is pivotal to the design thinking process, and an essential capacity to ensure successful execution across all phases of the design thinking framework.

In this article, we will highlight where and why in the design process empathy might best be applied. We will share how to engage a deeper level of empathy that enables you to better discover innovative design opportunities.

To be effective (in work and in life) requires empathy with yourself, your team, clients and participants.

To empathise with self, ensures consistency and is a basis for empathic accuracy, that is your ability to **accurately** infer the thoughts and feelings of others. To empathise with your team enables a cohesive and coordinated effort. To empathise with clients and stakeholders ensures your project is on track and relevant.

Design thinking is a framework that has human-centric design at its core. By default, then, empathy forms part of any design thinking exercise. This is because it involves connecting to and understanding peoples' wants, needs, goals and desires. By understanding these, we can then define and co-create desirable solutions and experiences that add value to peoples' lives. Empathising with users, stakeholders and colleagues during a design-thinking exercise helps bring about this deeper understanding. But of course, as we will point out later, empathy is first about tuning in to self.

Ensuring empathic accuracy

Empathy is not a given and needs to be acknowledged and nurtured in oneself. Its application should not be taken for granted.

What is experienced as empathy may well be a projection of your own feelings and thoughts.

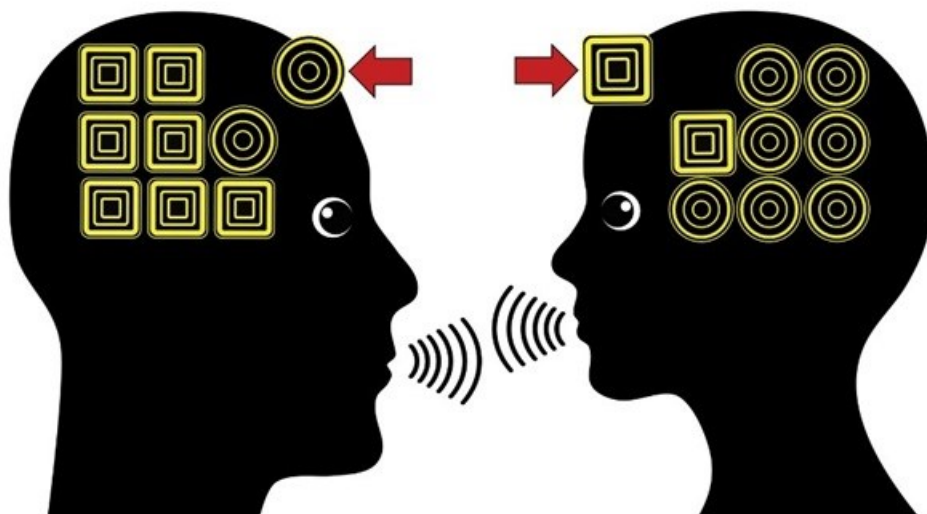
As part of the process towards empathy there is a shared affect experience, which is a mix of your client's thoughts and feelings, and a combination of what you were experiencing before the interaction as well as what they bring up in you.

Skills are required to distinguish what comes from where. The oversimplification of this complex skill set may mean a lot of hard work goes off track.

Empathy is potentially innate, but many events in life determined whether it is developed or not. It may have been subverted as a child. Fortunately, with directed intent, it can be brought on track and enhanced into adulthood.

How do you ensure that your efforts to empathise are on track?

- The first step is to understand the *process of empathy*, as well as its *potential pitfalls*.
- The second is to apply practical exercises to *awaken latent capacities* and check in with potential pitfalls.
- The third is to practice, practice, practice...



The process of empathy

Insights from neuroscience identify three elements essential to empathy: an automatic, unconscious shared affect experience, an ability to separate your own experiences from those of your participant, and a capacity to take the perspective of your participant.

Shared affect: We have an automatic, and usually unconscious, proclivity to share experiences with people we observe or even think about empathically.

This means that you feel and have a bodily response similar to the feeling you observe or imagine in your client or design research participant. It is referred to as emotional contagion, is often confused with empathy, but is actually *the essential raw material* upon which you can rely for empathy.

You'll also have bodily responses such as bodily tensions, and changes in warmth, breathing and heart rate corresponding to the emotions. Problem is that they are AUTOMATIC and UNCONSCIOUS. The opportunity is they can be brought to awareness, as we will discuss later.

Separating self from other: Your life experiences, and the meaning you made of them, will determine how you notice and interpret your client's experience. This is also largely automatic and unconscious.

Say, for example, you hear a participant describe a frustration with an existing product. You've had a similar frustration. The automatic mirrored experience will be magnified by your own experience. It will be the cue that you note and take home. This is referred to as self/other overlap.

Accurate empathy requires that you distinguish your own contribution from that of the participant.

Perspective taking: Only now are you able to attempt the oft quoted step of empathy: walking in their shoes.

This requires that you imagine your participant in their situation. It is only possible if you have gone through the first phases of noticing cues in your participant and in yourself in response to your participant, and been able to distinguish between the two.

Potential pitfalls of empathy

You may confuse emotional contagion with empathy.

You may react to their strong emotions with a resonant emotion in yourself.

You may be triggered to empathic over-arousal, or indeed euphoria or personal distress as the mirrored experience of your participant resonates with your own experience.

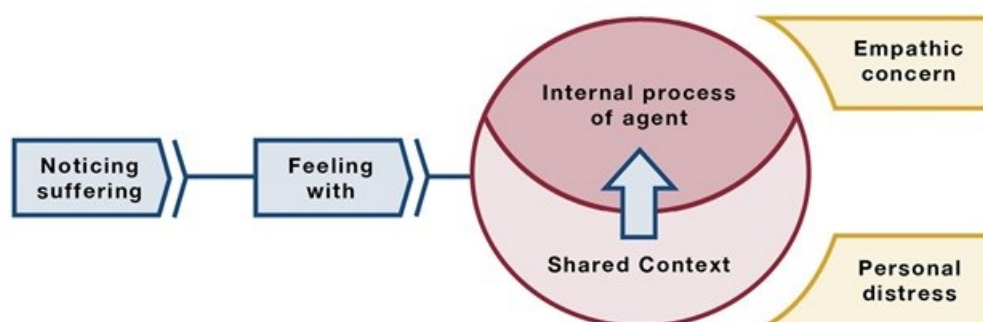
In each you become over-identified with your participant.

Over-identification may also lead to empathic concern, akin to sympathy.

Accurate awareness of mind-sets, biases, and prejudices is essential to imagine your client in their situation. Without, you are deluded into thinking you're imagining them. In fact you are imagining yourself in their context.

Diversity in the empathy process is critical.

One person's experience may be different to another's. We need to understand the context, situation and stage that people are going through. Why was this experience good or bad? Empathising with the situation is as important as empathising with the person.



Awakening latent empathy

We do seem to have a latent potential for empathy, but its awakening is dependent on interactions as we grow up. Fortunately, shortfalls can be mitigated with directed intent and practice.

Your most valuable resources in this process are your SELF and your BODY.

YOU as an empathic resource

There is a misconception that you should put yourself aside as you engage empathically with others.

Your life experience facilitates empathy. Your context informs your insights.

You are most likely to experience automatic empathy with others when your life experiences overlap their experiences. To understand the experiences of others with vastly differing culture and context requires that you look at, and make sense of, your own mind-set, symbolism and representations.

Knowing yourself acutely prevents you from projecting your own thoughts and feelings onto others.

BODY language revisited

Insights from neuroscience around mirror neurons confirm how vital the link between mind and body, and never more so than in empathy.

Body cues, your own and your participant's, enable you to access deep empathy and check-in on your own preconceptions.

- Tuning in to body sensations enables you to be aware of the shared affect between you and your participants.
- To know when you are in sync with your participants and when you might have wondered off track.
- To guide you back to coordinated engagement.

Observing, imagining or remembering body cues in your participant provide insight about their deeper needs.

This is more than a superficial nod to body language.

Just as the rocks on a shoreline tell the story of winds and waves, so body cues tell the story of the deeper workings of the thinking, feeling person within. You perceive them in gesture, posture, facial expression and voice tone.

Read more on how in the section on practice below.

The practice of empathy

You are able to hone your empathy capacities with structured intent and regular practice.

Empathy requires that you tune in to your self first, then in to your team members, clients or research participants.

With regular and intentional focus on these skills, you'll awaken latent empathy capacities.

This is a circular and emergent process, not a linear one. You may follow these steps in order. You may go back and forth amongst them.

- Tune in to self
- Notice cues in your team, clients or participants.
- Bracket and discern cues in your team, clients or participants.
- Name the essence in yourself and your team, clients or participants.
- Capture creative insights as outputs.



Tune in to self

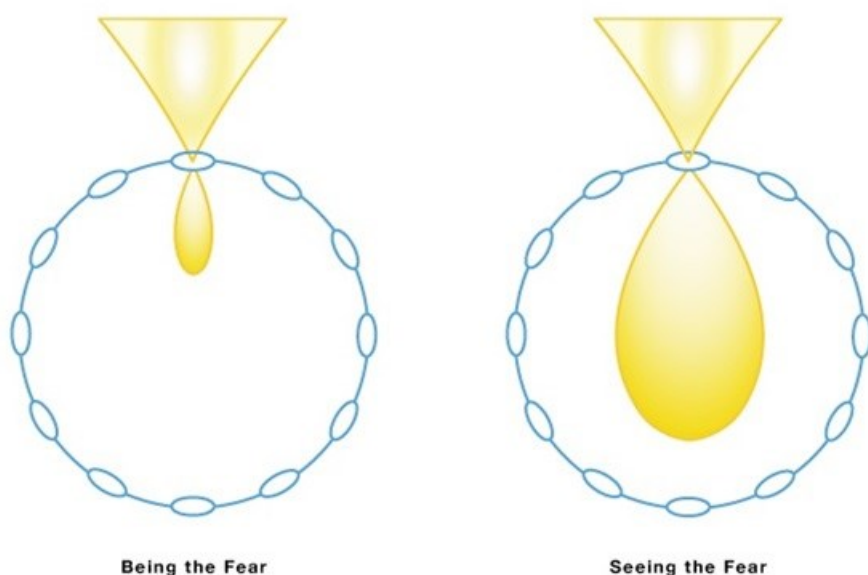
First, set an intention in the bigger scheme of your project.

Apply self-empathy to identify where you are in relation to your team, clients and participants in thought, feeling and intention.

Become aware of your own body cues (for a hands-on and practical experience see the link below for facilitated workshops).

- Notice and name any body movements such as breathing and heart changes in yourself;
- Notice and name any feelings in yourself; and
- Notice and name any fleeting thoughts in yourself.

You don't need to put the thoughts, feelings or sensations aside. The act of noticing and naming means you see them in front of you. They are no longer running your show. For example, you may be feeling anxious or fearful as you engage with a new project or meet new people. By noticing and naming the fear you orientate yourself in relation to the fear, gaining perspective.



Notice cues in your team, clients or participants

The key to empathic accuracy is to notice and make sense of a complex array of cues.

A plethora of *cues* are sensed passively, and fed into an automatic action response system. They never reach the light of day. We need to apply the full range of our sensing apparatus to make the most of them.

(In sensing we work with, not five but, twelve nuanced senses, some recognised in physiology, but not generally applied, six of them relevant here.)

- *Visual* to observe micro movements and shifts in body cues (posture, gesture, facial expression) to notice shifts in internal experience;
- *Temperate* to notice the warmth, as sympathy or antipathy, they have to their experience;
- *Auditory* to hear their narrative;
- *Tonal* to discern the precise meaning inherent in their choice of words;
- *Thought* to figure the flow of their ideas; and
- *The sense of I* to attend to the individual and how they relate to their experience.

Bracket and discern cues in your team, clients or stakeholders

Covert cues exist embedded amongst the overt cues.

They are available to you with a sensitive assessment of the overt cues as a whole. They are discerned with the following capacities:

- *Imagine* with the conscious creation of a mental picture as a holographic representation of your client in their experience;
- *Inspire* by imbuing the mental picture with emotional colour and tone; and
- *Intuit* by applying thought and perspective to consolidate the representation.

Name the essence

You are now ready to name the essential nature of the representation you have before you. This represents your empathic experience of your team member, client or participant. **Capture creative insights as outputs**

Your empathic insights are ready to be taken up in the next phase of the design process.

Remember there is no absolute, one, true insight. Trust your instinct. Check it out with your team, clients or participants.

Your authentic intention to go deep enables them to open further to themselves. And facilitates an empathic sense-making journey between you.

See [here](#) for information on our upcoming workshop, on 13 February 2017 in Cape Town.

ABOUT ROBERT BLOOM AND KATHERINE TRAIN

Robert Bloom, founder of Design Thinkers Group and Design Thinkers Academy-SA, has been facilitating design thinking programs since 2011. Robert has facilitated workshops with listed companies on the JSE as well as in Dubai and Kuwait. Katherine Train has studied empathy in organisations through the lens of SA, cultural and resource diversity and a history of social upheaval. She's been researching and facilitating workshops on empathy and related topics since 2005 in corporate, NGO and the public sector.

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