Empathy as an essential skill for talent development consultants

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to present empathy as an ideal characteristic of consultants for talent development (CTD). It provides a contextualized look at how empathy manifests in CTD practice and offers practical guidance for improving CTD empathy skills, and thus their performance in the corporate classroom.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 34 interviews with talent development professionals were analyzed using a qualitative coding process.

Findings – Apart from functional and industry knowledge, a collection of soft skill themes emerged from the analysis, including active listening, perspective taking, audience adaptation and communication style. These themes coalesced around the construct of empathy and provided a framework with which to understand how empathy is expressed and leveraged in talent development consulting.

Originality/value – While business research has explored the importance of empathy in some workplaces, to the knowledge, this is the first study focusing on the empathy of CTDs. In addition, literature paints a fractured and anecdotal picture of soft skills for the ideal consultant. This research helps CTDs, those who hire them and business educators target essential skills for facilitating workplace learning.

Keywords Training, Talent development, Empathy, Consulting

Paper type Research paper

Conceptualizing empathy as an essential skill for talent development consultants

Traditional models of professionalism focus on exclusive jurisdiction over technical knowledge and standards of training and ethics (Wilensky, 1964, p. 138). Given the breadth of talent development topics and occupational titles in this area are wide, it is difficult to tie professional competencies and knowledge to evaluate practitioners working in the industry. Consequently, what makes an ideal consultant for talent development (CTD) is further complicated as business consulting has a mixed reputation (Furusten, 2012) where consultants have been called "charlatans" and "snake-oil salesmen" (Bouwmeester and Stiekema, 2015, p. 2433). Research on what makes an effective business consultant is largely anecdotal (Banai and Tulimieri, 2013); however, researchers have identified functional

knowledge and knowledge of an industry, communication and analytical skills, creativity, leadership abilities and positive personality traits as common characteristics of successful consultants (Banai and Tulimieri, 2013; Bouwmeester and Stiekema, 2015). Additionally, the Association for Talent Development (ATD) includes emotional intelligence and decision-making, collaboration and leadership, cultural awareness and inclusion, project management, compliance and ethical behavior and lifelong learning in their *Talent Development Capability Model* (Association for Talent Development, 2020b). Although talent development certifications exist (e.g. those provided by the ATD), the lack of a widely adopted credentialing system has led to skepticism in the sector. Despite the reoccurrence of soft skills in consulting literature, studies have lacked scientific exploration (Banai and Tulimieri, 2013) of characteristics and have not considered how soft skills in the corporate classroom are weighed against functional and industry knowledge. Literature paints a fractured picture of ideal consultants. It, therefore, may be difficult for industry professionals and business educators to select and develop essential skills.

Empathy, often treated as a construct of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), is approached within talent development research and practitioner publications from a cognitive perspective. For example, the *Talent Development Body of Knowledge* (Association for Talent Development, 2020a, p. 22) – a definitive resource for talent development professionals studying for the Certified Professional in Talent Development – draws upon Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory and explains empathy as the knowledge of emotion or processes of decision-making rather than the application of skills or practices associated with empathy such as active listening or demonstrating a concern for others. What is more, other publications, especially short-form articles, tend to highlight the utilitarian outcomes of empathy – such as higher income or productivity (Thyagarajan, 2019). Articles and blogs either point to the benefits of empathy or are largely theoretical, leaving a need for work that offers specific, contextualized examples of empathy practiced on-the-job.

We conducted 34 interviews with talent development professionals to offer a qualitative understanding of a phenomenon that is described in cognitive or utilitarian ways rather than in social or practical ways in academic publications, When describing ideal CTDs, a collection of soft skill themes emerged, including active listening, perspective taking, audience adaptation and communication style. Using a qualitative data analysis approach, we determined these themes coalesce around the construct of empathy. Participants provided insights into how empathy was practiced and best demonstrated by ideal CTDs *in situ*. In other words, interviews did not just identify active listening as important but showed how active listening was performed. In the following section, we first explore empathy in organizational settings. Then, we describe our research methods, explicate themes emerging from data analysis and present the implications of this research.

Understanding empathy

The debate over empathy's constitutive range of cognitive and affective traits is significant, leading to an equivocal definition of the concept. In fact, definitions have varied so much as to lead some scholars to claim the term has no meaning at all (Pigman, 1995). Despite this debate, there are several reoccurring ways in which empathy is conceptualized in literature. Empathy is frequently broken down into its cognitive and affective attributes (De Vignemont and Singer, 2006; Hojat, 2009). Cognitive empathy is expressed when individuals engage in perspective-taking to comprehend another's mental state and (Lawrence *et al.*, 2004, p. 911) and communicate this understanding (Hojat, 2007). Hojat argues, "empathy is a predominantly cognitive (rather than emotional) attribute that involves an understanding

(rather than feeling) of experiences, concerns and perspectives [. . .]" (Hojat, p. 80). Hojat's definition focuses on the cognitive, perceptive abilities of individuals, which are carried through to responses to observed perspectives and emotions. Researchers also recognize the affective traits of empathy where empathy is "the capacity to experience affective reactions to the observed experiences of others" (Shamay-Tsoory, 2009, p. 215).

Joining these definitions, empathy can be described as the cognitive recognition of emotion and perspectives, precipitating both appropriate cognitive and affective responses. Dvash and Shamay-Tsoory (2014), who investigated the neurological foundations of empathy, emphasize how empathy requires both knowing and feeling: "[. . .] empathy is the link between knowing the thoughts and feelings of others, experiencing them and responding to others in caring, supportive ways" (p. 282). With this conceptualization, it is understood that empathy manifests when engaged in social interaction. Thus, empathy is a fundamental part of workplace learning. This study utilizes this combined definition where empathy is the ability to recognize and respond to others' feelings, needs and concerns.

Empathy is important in the workplace where empathic abilities will affect one's quality of professional relationships and interactions. Empathy has been studied in organizational contexts such as business-to-business sales (Anaza et al., 2018), marketing (Peterson and Leonhardt, 2015), nursing (Hunt et al., 2017), health and human services (Hojat, 2009) and front-line employee customer service (Varca, 2009). In addition, empathy has been studied in relation to managerial performance and ethical decision-making (Dietz and Kleinlogel, 2014), empathy flow (Gill et al., 2018), listening (Parks, 2015), emotion in organizations (Miller et al., 2007) and favorable effects on employee dispositions and behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 1993; George, 1991; McNeely and Meglino, 1994; Singh, 2014). These studies found empathy positively affecting workplace relationships and performance through Varca's (2009) findings indicated emotionally identifying with customers can cause front-line employees to stress and Gill et al. (2018, p. 116) pointed out that empathy burnout occurs frequently among professionals working in "high-stress situations or are dealing with difficult people or people with high needs."

In addition to the aforementioned contexts and applications, scholars have considered empathy and its positive influence on organizational training outcomes (Gill et al., 2018; Lindsey et al., 2015; Vann, 2017). Gill et al. (2018) interviewed empathy trainers and managers of organizations and found study participants experienced challenges with maintaining professional boundaries where workplace relationships could be jeopardized if levels of intimacy were too high. Participants also did not always have the energy to maintain empathy across both their professional and personal lives. In addition, it was difficult for participants to find the time to express empathy and described becoming desensitized to situations calling for empathy.

Vann (2017) considered the influence of empathy on the work of instructional designers for adult online learners. Two important findings relating to empathy and our study emerged:

(1) empathy was essential to quality course design for adult learners but was an underrepresented topic in instructional design literature; and

(2) instructional strategies should reflect an understanding of adult learners' constraints, including demands on their time, technological skill and cognitive and physical abilities.

Considering these studies, it is likely trainer empathy can positively influence the design and facilitation of training but the sustained expression of empathy in a variety of contexts is potentially a difficult and exhausting task. Furthermore, what empathy *looks like* in these contexts needs more clarity.

Whether empathy can be taught has been debated, perhaps, more than the definition of the concept. There is evidence, however, to suggest it can be developed (Lindsey *et al.*, 2015). For instance, trainers in Gill *et al.*'s (2018) study provided a number of empathy-building strategies including expressing empathy toward trainees who struggled to empathize with others, telling personal stories trainees could relate to and asking a question to have trainees reflect on what others felt and thought. Lindsey *et al.* (2015) effectively used perspective-taking exercises to promote empathy in diversity training. With the importance of empathy in the workplace established, we investigated how empathy was identified by CTDs as an ideal quality.

Methods
We investigated industry perceptions of ideal CTDs through interviews with 34 talent development professionals. We collected detailed, context-specific descriptions of professionals' experiences with CTDs. As we began to see empathy emerge as a touchstone for a host of characteristics during data analysis, we refocused and used the following questions to guide data analysis:

Q1. How does empathy manifest in the CTD-client relationship?

Q2. Why is it important for CTDs to possess empathy?

Participants
Participants were recruited through Qualtrics research services and our professional networks. To target a population for participation, we used professional titles typical of individuals in talent development roles such as Directors of Human Resources, Training and Development or Talent Development and their associated specialist positions. Our data include perspectives from various organizational levels but all described training as a primary feature of their jobs. Participants came from a variety of industries such as finance, online retail, technology services, hospitality and publishing. In total, 20 interview participants were recruited through Qualtrics and another 14 were recruited through our professional networks. We contacted first, second and third-degree LinkedIn connections who indicated they worked in talent development. In total, 20 interviewees were female and 14 were male. The age of participants ranged from 27 to 64.

Data analysis
We developed a semi-structured interview protocol after an initial review of literature that sought to explore ideal characteristics. It included questions such as: Can you think of a time when someone exemplified the characteristics of an ideal CTD? How do you determine if a CTD is credible? How does your organization go about hiring CTDs? Broad, open-ended questions allowed participants to self-select the experiences they found most memorable to share rather than directing them to a set of pre-selected characteristics. We did not ask participants about empathy but rather, as tends to happen in qualitative inquiry, the concept emerged naturally from the stories they told and was identified through data analysis.

Phone interviews were audio-recorded and lasted 13 to 60 min (*M* length = 25). Approximately 13.5 h of interview audio files were transcribed to produced 246 pages (*M* length = 7.4) of single-spaced text. Two interviews had audio errors so six single-spaced pages of detailed notes were analyzed. Transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose, a secure, collaborative qualitative data analysis site, which allowed us to review each other's ongoing analysis.

We used an iterative qualitative coding process (Tracy, 2013), where we referred back to or conducted new literature searches to refined codes and research questions as analytical links emerged. Periodically, we met to refine codes and eliminate redundancies. We undertook the process in two main stages, namely, first-cycle and second-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013). First-cycle coding was guided by Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence (when comments have the same meaning but are worded differently), repetition (when the exact words and phrases are repeated) and forcefulness (when a participant stresses specific content, most often nonverbally).

As first-cycle codes began to stabilize, we began second-cycle coding. This involved lifting codes to higher levels of abstraction. Upon completing second-cycle coding in the first 26 interviews, we began to see empathy as a possible framework for this study. We conducted additional literature reviews to conceptualize the dimensions of empathy. Then, we revisited transcripts and conducted an additional eight interviews to determine data resonated with these dimensions, to refine categorizations and to reach saturation where interviews produced no new first-cycle codes (Tracy, 2013). We see the diversity of our participants' positions and industries as a strength in this study. Despite varied industry backgrounds and professional seniority, strong, compelling themes revolving around the core construct of empathy were identified.

Findings
In this section, we present findings from the qualitative analysis of data and address the research questions:

RQ1. How does empathy manifest in the CTD-client relationship?

RQ2. Why is it important for CTDs to possess empathy?

"Empathy," defined generally as being aware of and responding appropriately to others' feelings, needs and concerns stood out as a touchstone for stories describing ideal CTDs. It was signaled in participants' stories of face-to-face training and training design and evaluation.

In this section, we describe themes from data analysis that support empathy as a key quality for CTDs. First, we look at how active listening and perspective-taking were described as essential activities for understanding learner feelings, needs and concerns. Then we explore how CTDs utilized the information to formulate empathic responses by adapting the training content and their communication style to fit the needs of participants. The summary table below provides a quick look at how empathy and its related themes were defined and identified in transcripts.

Identifying feelings, needs and concerns
All participants described ideal CTDs as actively pursuing an understanding of the needs of a business and groups of trainees. CTDs actively listened and engaged in perspective-taking with clients prior to training. They also demonstrated concern for learners' needs during training. Through these activities, ideal CTDs were able to acquire information needed to develop appropriate learning objectives customize training.

Active listening
Listening goes beyond the physiological process of hearing and requires the decoding of and assignment of meaning to sounds. Participants described ideal CTDs as active listeners, adept at the process of hearing, assigning meaning and verifying interpretations (Shockley-

Zalabak, 2012, p. 170). Verification of meaning signaled CTDs were engaged in active listening to understand the needs of an organization and its learners.

Ron, an HR specialist, emphasized listening as the most important quality he looked for in a CTD:

> I've worked with a bunch of [external trainers]. I think the biggest [competency] is listening to ability and the fact of when I'm hiring someone to do stuff, I want someone that listens to me and not just listens long enough so they can figure out how to sell their solution to me.

This excerpt was coded as active listening because Ron points to the CTDs' ability to suspend prejudgment and accurately decoding what he, the client, was saying, rather than focusing on the goal of making a sale. Active listening as a method for understanding how to customize training was discussed by several participants. They frequently mentioned being frustrated with "off-the-shelf" training packages that "failed to take into account their organization's mission, culture and staff's training needs."

In the above excerpt, the participant directly emphasized the importance of active listening in hiring and the training design stage. Listening was also discussed in the context of the training classroom and referred to indirectly as CTDs' abilities to "read the room." Dolores, a director in higher education, commented:

> I also think a training person needs some level of dynamism, you know, they need to be kind of able to read a room. They need to have some level of intuition so that they can see how the training's going [. . .] they are very good at being able to read a room and kind of direct attention in the right places.

The "intuition" she speaks of during her interview is a result of noticing and listening to the audience's verbal and nonverbal cues and taking an interest in their needs and ongoing moods. Sandra, an organizational development manager, provided clarity with her comment:

> I think the ideal trainer/consultant doesn't look at how well they do, and they're not focused on themselves, but they're focused on their audience. And that they check for understanding. Just because you told them doesn't mean they got it [. . .] you have to watch for those verbal and non-verbal clues to know and to understand how you know if a person got it or not.

Sandra indirectly addresses active listening when she describes focusing on the audience's cues and verifying perceptions. Excerpts, thus, far have focused on active listening as a component of cognitive empathy; however, CTDs were also described as listening to understand trainees' emotional states. Eva, an HR manager identified why understanding the emotions of others is important:

> [. . .] at no point do you want to offend the learner because if the learner feels that they're being talked to above their skill set or below, then at that point the learner shuts down.

Active listening was identified as an important skill for understanding the needs, feelings and concerns of clients during the CTDs hiring process, training design and training sessions. Through active listening and gathering information from verbal and nonverbal cues, the ideal CTDs could then aptly take the perspective of others.

Perspective-taking
Ideal CTDs were described as expressing sensitivity to and understanding others' perspectives. Kelly, a senior HR assistant working in retail stated plainly trainers needed to be "[. . .] willing to put yourself in the shoes of the person that you're actually training." Prior to the training event, time spent analyzing audience demographics and clients' industries

were described as efforts to understand audience expectations and motivations to learn. Once CTDs were faced with learners, however, they would continue to engage in perspective-taking to revise their approach on-the-spot. Dwaine, a director in the automotive industry points out that needs, feelings and concerns may not be consistent among learners. CTDs need to individualize trainees:

> You can't just group everybody together because people are individuals, they learn differently, you've got to approach them a little differently. So, you have to set up a unique way of handling those people and making them feel comfortable. It just seems to get better results that way, if you approach an individual and keep in mind what he does and what he likes and what he doesn't like.

This section focused on CTDs' abilities to understand others by engaging in active listening to take others' perspectives before and during training. In the next section, we explore how CTDs were described as responding to the needs, feelings and concerns.

Responding to feelings, needs and concerns

Data analysis indicated empathy requires more than identifying and understanding others' perspectives. Individuals must then select a cognitive and affective response to others' states. Now that we have discussed the typical means through which CTDs acquired client information, we will show how this information was used in training contexts described by participants. Participants described ideal CTDs engaging in audience adaptation where they tailored training to fit the needs, emotions and concerns of their clients. In addition, they adopted a communication style that captured the attention of and showed respect to learners.

Interview excerpts coded for audience adaptation frequently discussed the communication style of the CTD. We recognize adapting to an audience generally includes consideration of one's communication style; however, focusing the themes of "audience adaptation" on content selection and "communication style" on (non)verbal efforts, we can more easily disentangle response behaviors to clearly identify strategies used by CTDs.

Audience adaptation

The theme of audience adaptation was observed when participants spoke to tailoring training to recognize the unique standpoints of clients and learners. CTDs included and excluded content through a determination of what was most relevant and avoided offering "off-the-shelf" packages. Juanita, a professional development program manager, emphasized how adaptation was predicated on efforts made toward understanding others:

> Clearly the communication piece. Both in speaking and listening, I assume sometimes listening even more so. Which also could be a miss, not really listening so that you could customize an individualized good training for the needs of the organization and then the individuals [...]

In this excerpt, Juanita emphasizes the importance of active listening as a tool for making successful adaptations demonstrating it as a preceding skill.

In the training classroom, ideal CTDs also made efforts to adapt to learners by presenting content at a complexity level appropriate for their educational and experiential backgrounds. In other words, CTDs made efforts to work with others "on their level," which was described as having the effect of increasing the likelihood of content acceptance. When asked about ideal characteristics for CTDs, Ava, an HR professional said:

I think being able to identify your audience. Speak to your audience and not above them and not below them. You really have to gauge where that competency level is and be able to adjust appropriately [. . .].

Here we see Ava speak to understanding and responding to others through adaptation. This adaptation may happen frequently in a CTD's job. When asked the same question as Ava, HR Director Lenore responded:

Somebody who's dynamic and knows their audience and can adapt to lots of different audience members depending on the subject. Our corporate trainers train from different things from sexual harassment to how to sell cars. So, obviously, those are different presentations and the audiences are different, so they need to be adaptable.

Communication style

All participants spoke to the communication styles of the CTDs they had observed. They consistently stated ideal CTDs had "good communication skills" which could be described as the verbal and nonverbal efforts to capture the attention of clients and trainees, set them at ease and showed them respect. Good communicators were dynamic, enthusiastic and engaging. When these descriptors were probed in follow-up questions, more specific characteristics emerged. For example, the best CTDs avoided lecturing and reading presentation slides. They paid attention to their audiences and regularly checked-in with them.

Eve, a training specialist, recalled a time when poor communication jeopardized learning outcomes. In the following excerpt she described a CTD who failed to understand the group's competence level and notice their confusion during an Excel training:

Literally 10 min in, we were all kind of looking at each other because he had gone so far ahead because he knew the material so well that we were still on the first page, trying to figure out where he'd gone in the computer and looking at our instruction manual, trying to [. . .] It was just [. . .] It was comical. We literally had to stop him and say, "okay. Slow down. Back up. Start again," "cause he lost all of us on page two."

In addition to emphasizing the importance of checking for understanding and observing when trainees may be experiencing anxiety or stress, Eve pointed out subject matter expertise is not enough to make someone an ideal CTD.

Checking for understanding was a common communication technique separating descriptions of good and bad communicators. Kelly spoke to this and nonverbal elements when she said:

I believe communication skills, in general, is [sic] very important, being able to monitor not only your tone of your voice, the speed at which you're talking, being able to circle back and say, "Hey, did everything I say make sense, do you have any questions about that?" And being able to effectively communicate and use those verbal and non-verbal cues to communicate that message are top characteristics for sure.

Sandra echoed this when she said:

But when you're doing skills training or compliance training or any of those things, people don't check for understanding. I mean, I could stand up there and tell you for 2 h how to go do something, and you go, "Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh," and the first time you get on the field, you do it wrong. What [a trainer] is gonna say is, "well I told them." Yeah, but did they get it? How do you know that?

Joe, a director of organizational development, provided a comment that summarized the importance of perception checking. He stressed, "training isn't telling. If it were, we could all play basketball like Michael Jordan." Ideal CTDs were those who communicated with trainees to get them emotionally, intellectually and physically involved with the content. Enthusiasm and dynamism were presented as a way to excite learners and increased cognitive and physical involvement with content.

In summary, this section explicated how ideal CDTs identified feelings, needs and concerns through active listening and perspective-taking and responded to those feelings, needs and concerns through audience adaptation and communication style. In the following section, we discuss how these results expand our understanding of empathy and how it can be signaled and developed in training contexts.

Discussion

Empathy is an essential workplace skill because of its impact on interpersonal relationships with colleagues, clients and customers (Gill *et al.*, 2018). Insider perspectives on how CTDs use empathy highlight empathy as a complex concept including cognitive and affective recognition of and response to others' states of being (Dvash and Shamay-Tsoory, 2014). Ideal CTDs used that recognition to guide their behaviors prior to and during training. Consequently, a major contribution of this study is the contextualization and explication of empathy in the field of consulting for talent development and the identification of how it manifests in practice. While business research has explored the importance of empathy in managerial and front-line contexts, to our knowledge, this is the first study focusing on consultants working in talent development. Empathy is instrumental in talent development and our findings demonstrate empathic practice.

Banai and Tulimieri (2013) offer that definitions of business consultants have focused on the tasks consultants perform rather than characteristics, making it necessary to explore consultants' essential elements for a more accurate definition. They offer that knowledge, skills, abilities and personality are the defining elements of a business consultant. They urge researchers to utilize scientific approaches and investigate the emotional intelligence of business consultants and their impact on job performance. Our work picks up this lead by demonstrating how empathy, a dimension of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), was linked to the positive perception of consultant performance. Our systematic and rigorous data analysis provides scientific support that empathy is an essential skill for effective CTDs. As a qualitative study, this research does not claim to be generalizable or predictive but is contextually bound and sought insight into events (Tracy, 2013). Despite this, the diversity of participants' professional backgrounds in talent development and strength of themes inspires confidence that empathy is important for consultants to possess across industry sectors.

Subject matter expertise (SME) and industry experience (IE) are noted in the literature as essential for consultants. These qualities, while mentioned by some participants, were deemphasized in place of discussions on soft skills related to empathy. SME and IE were assumed by participants. They did not doubt CTDs would have the knowledge necessary to design training. This allowed us to focus the analysis on organizing and making sense of the core soft skills attributed to ideal CTDs. An important contribution of this study to talent development literature is how communication style was positioned as an element of empathic expression and more frequently discussed than SME and IE. Furthermore, our findings urge CTDs to ground their facilitation choices in the expectations and feelings of their learners.

Practical implications

The previous sections explored empathy as a primary characteristic of ideal CTDs. Now, we elaborate on three main practical implications resulting from this study:

(1) train-the-trainer opportunities;

(2) modified training assessments; and

(3) online personal branding.

Train-the-trainer

Although it has been questioned if empathy is something we are born with, research shows empathy levels can increase with explicit efforts (Gentry *et al.*, 2016; Goleman, 1998). Thus, for professional development, we suggest CTDs build their empathic capacities. Training-the-trainer opportunities on the four empathy-related themes outlined in our results would prepare CTDs to practice empathy skills on the job. Rather than tackling empathy building as a monolithic task, our study points to more discreet areas that contribute an overall impression of CTD empathy. Specifically, we suggest skill development in four major areas, namely, active listening, perspective taking, audience adaptation and communication style.

Active listening was essential for understanding needs and responding to learners. During client meetings or when reviewing company content to assess needs, active listening was essential to designing appropriate training. Active listening facilitated CTDs recognition of the emotions present in the (class)room and assisted in perspective-taking. Perspective-taking allowed the CTDs to anticipate the needs and concerns of clients and also included analyzing demographic and psychographic trends. Skilled audience adaptation was achieved when CTDs conducted needs analyzes or adapted content and delivery to suit learner preferences and needs. Creating new training or adapting existing programs was one of the ways CTDs responded to the needs, concerns and emotional states of learners.

Finally, communication style was important for capturing and keeping learners' attention. Elements such as vocal variety and dynamics, eye contact and gestures complemented and emphasized important content and made trainers appear open and approachable. Importantly, an engaging communication style also seemed to lead to the perception that learners were more comfortable interacting during training, asking questions and paying attention, which could contribute to achieving learning outcomes.

Modified training assessments

Each of these skills (active listening, perspective taking, audience analysis and communication style) are only mastered through disciplined practice supported with feedback (Gallo, 2014). These findings create a compelling case for including empathy-oriented questions on post-training assessments. Such questions could identify if trainers made participants feel valued or at ease, and how they did so. Results could then be used to target specific empathy skills for improvement.

Online personal branding

Another practical implication of this study comes from participants' discussion of online resources used to investigate the credibility of CTDs for hire. References and examples of work on social media and professional websites can showcase CTDs' capacity for empathy, as well as industry expertise and knowledge. In general, CTDs can describe situations wherein they used empathy to provide an outstanding curriculum. They can do this with a teaching philosophy outlining their teaching values and examples of how they manifest in

the classroom. A blog or vlog detailing professional insights can also be an outlet demonstrating frequent self-reflection and improvement. Additionally, CTDs can request client recommendations that reference empathy-related skills such as listening. Finally, CTDs can post recorded footage of training to demonstrate their communication styles. Although this content can be housed on a private website, participants noted LinkedIn was often used to evaluate CTDs.

Future research

The themes (Table 1) explicated in this study provide researchers a framework to guide their research question or hypothesis construction for future qualitative and quantitative research. Individuals recall and interpret experiences in a variety of ways and with varied consistency. Although this study is more concerned with what stood out to participants as memorable and ideal, ethnographic studies where researchers observe CTD-learner interactions could provide richer descriptions of how empathy is deployed and responded to in training. Importantly, this work could determine if the empathy themes observed in this study are regularly recognized by learners. We would expect to see CTDs rated highly in teaching effectiveness to demonstrate notable empathetic cues during training.

Our data discuss CTDs in face-to-face settings. However, many training is partial, if not completely, conducted in digital environments. We believe this trend will increase as the need or option to work from home is essential in times of public health crises (Pelta, 2020). Future research could explore how empathy is signaled by facilitators in mediated training. For example, research is needed on how trainers adapt their communication if they are unable to observe learner nonverbal cues.

Our results lay the foundation for quantitative studies to survey human resources and talent or organizational development departments about the empathic qualities of their trainers. For a review of possible empathetic communication, measurements to use in quantitative studies, see Suwinyattichaiporn (2016). Furthermore, we believe that this future research could also provide insight into the essential skills of business consultants generally.

Parent themes	Sub-themes	Sample codes
Identifying feelings, needs and concerns: the means through which individuals acquired information pertaining to their clients and trainees	*Active listening:* the process of hearing, assigning meaning and verifying our interpretations	Paying attention Listening Suspending judgment Verifying interpretations Observing
	Perspective-taking: evaluating phenomena from another's presumed standpoint	Putting yourself in another's shoes Imagining audience response Researching an industry Individualizing clients/trainees
Responding to feelings, needs and concerns: actions are taken in response to acquired client and trainee information	*Audience adaptation:* tailoring training solutions to the specific needs of an organization. Tailoring training activities and content to particular trainees	Tailoring content Customizing training Reducing subject complexity Reducing power distance
	Communication style: verbal and nonverbal efforts to capture the attention of clients and trainees, put them at ease and show them respect	Speaking dynamically Using a conversational tone Demonstrating enthusiasm Checking for understanding Using plain language

Table 1.
Theme articulation

Conclusion

Empathy is linked to positive organizational outcomes such as effective leadership, quality interpersonal relationships and high employee performance. Its importance in the workplace is evident in research and felt in our everyday interactions with colleagues, customers and clients. When reviewing the literature on the characteristics of ideal consultants and talent development professionals, however, empathy does not stand out as a defining feature or is discussed abstractly. Rather, industry knowledge and a host of soft skills are discussed with little to tie them together. The broad scope of ideal characteristics and lack of a single credentialing system makes it difficult to judge the quality of CTDs and innovate curriculum training trainers.

To address this, we conducted interviews with 34 talent development professionals and data analysis revealed empathy was an ideal characteristic of CTDs. Our results provided a look at how empathy manifested in talent development contexts. Empathy was observed when CTDs addressed and responded to the feelings, needs and concerns of learners, predominately through active listening, perspective-taking and adapting training and their communication styles. These findings suggest CTDs should undertake empathy training to be more effective in their work and have empathy-related questions on post-training assessments. In addition, we suggest CTDs highlight how empathy has benefited their work in professional social media profiles and webpages.

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