


# Empathy in the Administrative Field of Healthcare: Soft Skills Training and Its Impact on the Patient Experience

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## ABSTRACT

Empathy has been a key factor in human evolution, facilitating cooperation, social cohesion, and a sense of justice. While it has been widely studied in the clinical field, its impact on the performance of administrative staff in healthcare has received less attention. This article looks into the evolutionary development of empathy and its relevance in hospital management, highlighting its influence on patient interactions and organizational dynamics. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the challenges of applying empathy in healthcare administration are analyzed, including the risk of bias and the need for proper emotional regulation. It is argued that training in soft skills, particularly for administrative staff, is essential to improving service quality and strengthening workplace dynamics. Training strategies based on interactive simulations, mentoring, and virtual tools are proposed, allowing administrative personnel to develop balanced empathy that optimizes their performance without compromising objectivity in decision-making. Through a systemic analysis, we suggest that empathy should not be seen as merely an individual skill but as a structural factor influencing the overall functioning of healthcare institutions. Thus, the need for organizational policies that integrate empathy as a core principle in hospital management is emphasized.

**Keywords:** empathy, evolution, healthcare administrative staff, virtual platform, patient care.

## Empatía en el ámbito administrativo de salud: Capacitación en habilidades blandas y su impacto en la experiencia del paciente

### RESUMEN

La empatía ha sido un elemento clave en la evolución humana, facilitando la cooperación, la cohesión social y el sentido de justicia. Si bien ha sido ampliamente estudiada en el ámbito clínico, su impacto en el desempeño del personal administrativo en salud ha recibido menor atención. Este artículo explora el desarrollo evolutivo de la empatía y su relevancia en la gestión hospitalaria, destacando su influencia en la interacción con pacientes y en la dinámica organizacional.

Desde un enfoque interdisciplinario se analizan los desafíos que surgen al aplicar la empatía en la administración de la salud, incluyendo el riesgo de sesgos y la necesidad de una regulación emocional adecuada. Se argumenta que la formación en habilidades blandas, particularmente en el personal administrativo, es fundamental para mejorar la calidad del servicio y fortalecer el clima laboral. Se

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proponen estrategias de capacitación basadas en simulaciones interactivas, mentoría y herramientas virtuales, permitiendo que los administrativos desarrollen una empatía equilibrada que optimice su desempeño sin comprometer la objetividad en la toma de decisiones.

A través de un análisis sistémico se plantea que la empatía no debe considerarse solo una habilidad individual, sino un factor estructural que influye en el funcionamiento global de las instituciones de salud. De esta manera, se enfatiza la necesidad de políticas organizacionales que integren la empatía como un principio central en la gestión hospitalaria.

**Palabras clave:** empatía, evolución, personal administrativo sanitario, plataforma virtual, atención al paciente.

*Wise, upright, just word (...) means: a being who, at a given moment, has remained in a state of wisdom, harmony, and righteousness.*

Maurice Leenhardt

## INTRODUCTION

This article adopts an exploratory approach to examine the evolutionary process of empathy. Early collaboration among oysters as an example of interdependence offers an enlightening approach to their possible role as precursors of what is now understood as empathy, dating back approximately 300 million years.\* Although oysters and other early life forms exhibit interdependent behaviors essential for survival, genuine empathy begins to take shape in more complex organisms, such as mammals. In these, empathy goes beyond basic cooperation, involving the ability to recognize and respond to the emotions of others—an essential trait in the formation of cooperative societies. This evolutionary development in mammals, and later in humans, provides a key framework for understanding how interdependence and cooperation contributed to the emergence of empathic behaviors that are now fundamental in the workplace.

## EVOLUTIONARY ROOTS OF EMPATHY

Understanding the origins of empathy provides valuable guidance for training administrative staff in soft skills. Enhancing these competencies through targeted programs can significantly improve interactions with patients, fostering a deeper understanding of their needs.

Putting oneself in another's place—without necessarily feeling the same emotions, but understanding what the other feels and why—is a key component of this training. Within the healthcare system, a clear gap exists between the level of technological complexity and the training

provided to clinical versus administrative staff, especially in terms of developing interpersonal skills.

A key aspect in the evolution of empathy is interdependence, a principle present throughout nature. Organisms must collaborate to survive and thrive within their ecosystems. Oysters, by forming colonies and working together to build protective structures and filter water for food, display a rudimentary form of cooperation and division of labor. This collaboration can be seen as an early manifestation of interconnectedness and the understanding that working together benefits the entire group.

By extrapolating the notion of interdependence over time, one can postulate that empathy emerged as an extension of this dynamic in mammals and, later, in humans.

In mammals, Panksepp suggests that empathy may have originated from the need to care for and protect offspring, collaborate in hunting, and defend the group. The ability to understand and respond to the needs of other community members would have represented an evolutionary advantage in complex social environments<sup>2</sup>.

In humans, empathy has been a key factor in the construction of cooperative societies and the development of advanced civilizations<sup>3</sup>. However, the debate remains open within the scientific community as to whether interdependence and cooperation in nature inevitably led to the development of this capacity. To support this perspective, Panksepp argues that empathy is not an isolated individual skill, but rather a trait deeply rooted in mammalian evolution, possibly originating as an extension of parental care<sup>4</sup>.

Fossil evidence suggests that some female dinosaurs may have cared for sick or injured offspring, indicating the existence of a rudimentary emotional bond. Likewise, certain fossil records of mammals have shown signs of complex social behavior, reinforcing the hypothesis that empathy emerged as an evolutionary mechanism for care and cooperation<sup>4</sup>.

Yamamoto<sup>6</sup> proposes a model for studying empathy in primates based on three key factors: emotional matching, understanding, and prosociality. This approach enables the contextual classification of different empathic behaviors and offers valuable insights into their evolutionary origins and neurological foundations.

\* The Ostreidae family, which includes oysters, represents a variant of these valuable species in the marine environment. They are found in various regions of the world and are notable for their high productivity and ecological importance. Over time, they have been favored both for their relevance in the food chain and for their role in sustaining human life.

Bonobos in particular stand out for their strong social bonds and matriarchal organization. Females, even those without biological ties, often adopt orphaned young—suggesting an advanced form of empathy based on care and concern for others as a structural element of their social organization<sup>7, \*\*</sup>

## THE ORIGIN OF THE ABILITY TO PUT ONESELF IN ANOTHER'S PLACE

Human beings belong to the hominid family, a group of primates whose evolution over millions of years has been marked by anatomical, cognitive, and behavioral changes. These transformations have shaped our social abilities, including empathy—a key trait in human group interaction and organization<sup>8</sup>.

Empathy is deeply rooted in human socialization. Its origin is affected by a bunch of internal and external factors that shape its development and expression. Social and family structure, education, and work experience are key elements in how each individual perceives and exercises empathy<sup>9</sup>.

Iacoboni<sup>10</sup> has studied the role of mirror neurons in empathy, noting that these cells facilitate the imitation of others' emotions and behaviors. This mechanism not only enables better understanding of others but is also crucial for social learning and the development of empathy.

Similarly, Antonio Damasio argues that emotions are a critical component of decision-making and that empathy is an emotional skill that allows us to understand the feelings and intentions of others. Regarding mirror neurons, he has highlighted their influence on learning through imitation and on the ability to feel with others<sup>11</sup>.

From a biological perspective, empathy involves the activation of brain regions such as the insula and the anterior cingulate cortex, which are responsible for processing both one's own emotions and those of others. Various scientific studies have shown that this capacity has a neurological basis influenced by both genetics and the environment<sup>4</sup>. Social interaction reinforces the development of empathy, facilitating collaboration and coexistence within broader and more diverse communities<sup>12, 3</sup>.

From a philosophical perspective, Laurent Bove<sup>18</sup> analyzes the process of putting oneself in another's place through the way we perceive and experience others' emotions, such as joy or sadness.

When we imagine another person's feelings, our body reacts as if it were experiencing them itself—a phenomenon triggered by the repeated association of emotional images. This process creates an increase or decrease in the energy of our actions, allowing us to

experience these emotions internally. In other words, we are capable of indirectly feeling what others experience, establishing a connection that reinforces emotional identification spontaneously and instinctively.

Applying this analysis to the workplace and social structures, Graeber<sup>14</sup> invites us to reflect on the fact that many workers feel their roles lack purpose, which can cause significant moral harm. In the hospital setting, administrative staff face this same challenge when carrying out bureaucratic tasks that seem disconnected from patient care. This disconnection can undermine their empathy and the quality of their interactions, highlighting the need to design roles and duties that not only optimize operational efficiency but also strengthen the team's sense of purpose and emotional engagement. In this way, their work is more likely to be perceived as a valuable contribution to the patient experience and the overall quality of care provided.

Wendy Dean et al.<sup>15</sup>, although focused on medical staff, offer valuable insights for fostering empathy in other areas of the healthcare sector. Their study suggests that the structures and demands of the healthcare system can create ethical conflicts for workers, causing moral injury rather than simple burnout. This perspective calls for a rethinking of the importance of aligning workplace practices with principles of empathy and care.

In the high-pressure environment of an Emergency Department, where administrative staff play a crucial role in managing critical situations, it is essential to promote a workplace culture that prioritizes moral and emotional well-being. The development of empathy within these teams should not be viewed merely as an individual trait, but rather as the outcome of a work environment that cultivates sustainable ethical values. That underscores the need for structural reforms that recognize and address moral injury, fostering a more humane and empathic approach to care.

It is pertinent to pause here to delve deeper into the concept of value. Stern<sup>16</sup> argues that values, including the so-called 'goods,' do not always possess a direct perceptual reality. This idea can relate to the intangible nature of empathy: although it is not something tangible, its impact is evident in human interactions. Just as the existence of an object does not guarantee its value and vice versa, empathy is not always openly shown. A person may appear empathetic without truly being so, while another may genuinely exercise it without manifesting it in an obvious way. That reinforces the idea that the perception of a value does not always correspond to its intrinsic reality.

For administrative staff at an Emergency Center, pressure and stress can hinder the expression of an emotional connection at certain times. However, this does not mean they lack empathy, but rather that their capacity to express it depends on factors such as personality, education, and previous work experience<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to the behavioral and cognitive factors mentioned above, it is essential to consider how the environment shapes our biology through epigenetics.

\*\*Bonobos are primates belonging to the hominid family and are known for their close resemblance to chimpanzees. They are characterized by highly complex social behavior and a tendency to resolve conflicts through empathy. This species is found only in the forests south of the Congo River in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Although they were not recognized as a separate species until 1929, much about them remains unknown, including the full extent of their geographical range.

Some research in this field has shown that early experiences and the emotional environment can modify gene expression without altering the DNA sequence<sup>17</sup>. These findings indicate that empathy is not entirely innate, but evolves in response to relational dynamics. That highlights the importance of providing supportive environments from early childhood and, at the organizational level, reinforces the need to promote empathy through management policies that foster mutual understanding and respect.

## DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH A VIRTUAL PLATFORM

Although much of the research on empathy in healthcare has focused on clinical staff, this study broadens the scope by including the role of administrative personnel. Their frequent contact with patients and family members—especially in critical moments—directly affects how service quality is perceived. In comprehensive care, an empathetic attitude should extend to all actors within the system, promoting trust and transparency from the administrative side as well. This article, therefore, highlights the need to include administrative staff in soft skills training, with a particular emphasis on empathy as a key component.

The development of soft skills is a key factor in job performance, particularly in teamwork and patient care. Heckman and Kautz argue that socioemotional competencies such as empathy, perseverance, and collaboration are essential for professional success and adaptation to the organizational environment. That highlights the need to incorporate soft skills training into professional development programs, especially in the healthcare sector, where constant interaction with patients and interdisciplinary teamwork are fundamental. In addition to improving efficiency, these competencies help create a more harmonious and humanized work environment, with a direct impact on service quality<sup>18</sup>.

The challenge lies in integrating these dynamics into training and management strategies. In this regard, virtual tools have proven effective in developing soft skills.

The study by Kelm et al., published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, found that training programs including interactive simulations, case studies, and peer feedback can increase empathy among medical staff. Specifically, it concluded that communication training, combined with observing role models and receiving feedback, significantly improves physicians' empathy toward their patients<sup>19</sup>. These approaches could also be applied to administrative staff, enhancing interactions with patients and reducing conflicts.

As they often engage with individuals in high-stress circumstances, equipping these staff members with training in active listening, assertive communication, and managing challenging situations is essential. Although they do not deliver diagnoses, their daily interactions

have a direct impact on the patient experience and the perceived quality of the healthcare system.

Training in techniques such as *debriefing* (post-event reflection after difficult situations) and *defusing* (tension de-escalation mechanisms) is really helpful. These tools help manage tension in emotionally charged settings, supporting a centered and professional attitude during complex interactions. Everly and Mitchell<sup>20</sup> have identified debriefing as an effective resource for processing emotionally difficult experiences—something really important in hospital environments, where emotions often run high. Likewise, training in Psychological First Aid (PFA) would enable administrative staff to provide basic emotional support during crises, fostering respectful and empathetic interactions with patients and their families<sup>21</sup>.

Emotional recognition enables more sensitive and compassionate responses to others' experiences. Certain factors—such as cooperation, teamwork, conflict resolution, trust-building, and community support—have been essential for survival within social groups. These elements, in turn, can be enhanced as strategies to foster empathy. In this regard, telemedicine has had a positive impact on healthcare delivery by facilitating new forms of interaction that improve access to services and ensure continuity of care in different contexts<sup>22</sup>.

Empathy cannot be taught mechanically, as it requires a profound change in attitudes and values. Therefore, it is necessary to design a comprehensive training program in soft skills that involves all staff and adapts to their specific needs.

Considering the limitations imposed by rotating shifts, we propose implementing virtual activities focused on strengthening empathy in scenarios specific to the hospital environment. These will provide the flexibility needed for administrative staff to receive training at their convenience. In addition, the inclusion of games and interactive simulations will allow for the practice of decision-making based on understanding others by recreating realistic work situations.

On the other hand, the platform could also incorporate educational tools to support the ongoing professional development of administrative staff.

Likewise, we propose the creation of an online mentoring program, where experienced administrators act as role models, actively promoting empathetic attitudes among their peers. This initiative could complement discussion groups to share experiences, reflect collectively, and explore strategies for applying empathy in various workplace situations<sup>24</sup>. Participatory education encourages personal reflection and recognition of others—key elements for building more inclusive and humanized work environments. This approach fosters the authentic development of empathy by facilitating a deeper understanding of others' needs<sup>25</sup>. In this regard, historically contextualizing the origin and evolution of empathetic behavior helps underscore its relevance in the everyday tasks of administrative work.

## DISCUSSION

Empathy is a key factor; however, its influence on hospital management is not without challenges. While it facilitates more humane interactions and effective communication with patients and colleagues, it can also introduce biases that affect decision-making. In this context, it is essential for empathy to be managed in a balanced way—combining it with appropriate emotional regulation, mindful attention to others' needs, and actions oriented toward effective conflict resolution.

There is a compelling analogy between the ideas of Werner Heisenberg<sup>26</sup> and the dynamics of empathy in hospital settings. The German physicist proposed that the very act of observing alters the phenomenon being observed, challenging the notion of absolute objectivity. Similarly, in human interactions, the empathetic attitude of administrative staff is not neutral: it directly influences the emotional experience of both patients and the healthcare team. This “relational uncertainty” demands a conscious and sensitive disposition toward others, acknowledging that every administrative action—a word, a gesture, a delay—has emotional impact. Integrating this perspective allows empathy to be understood not as a mere communicative add-on, but as an active element that transforms institutional relationships.

In this essay, empathy is viewed not merely as a skill to cultivate but as a complex phenomenon that transcends the individual, fostering a holistic and systemic approach that supports both administrative personnel and the institution as a whole.

According to Von Bertalanffy's analysis<sup>27</sup>, one cannot fully understand a system by breaking it down into isolated parts; it must be studied as a whole, considering the interactions among its components. In this sense, the hospital system functions as an interconnected network in which each subsystem (administrative, nursing, medical, etc.) influences and is influenced by the others.

Strengthening empathy within the administrative subsystem not only improves its internal dynamics but also positively impacts the entire healthcare system by promoting collaboration among teams and directly benefiting patients and clinical staff.

Juan Sala<sup>28</sup> emphasizes that increasing specialization has fragmented knowledge into increasingly specific areas. This phenomenon, driven by a reductionist approach that seeks to simplify the understanding of complex phenomena, has given rise to what he calls the “dwarfing of knowledge.”

In medical administration, this phenomenon presents the challenge of balancing operational efficiency with a holistic approach to care, positioning empathy as a central guiding principle.

In this regard, David Graeber's reflection on Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift<sup>29</sup> offers a valuable perspective for understanding empathy in the hospital context. In many cultures, the act of giving goes beyond the mere exchange of goods: it is a bond that sustains the social fabric. Applied to the hospital setting, this suggests that empathy should not be seen as a peripheral skill,

but rather as an essential ethical component of every interaction. Healthcare professionals must go beyond delivering technical services; they should respond to a deep understanding of human needs and treat each individual with dignity.

Fostering an environment that prioritizes empathy not only enhances the patient experience but also reinforces the moral commitment of healthcare institutions.

Abraam Sonis<sup>30</sup> warned that focusing solely on conceptual or methodological aspects can reinforce the status quo and limit the potential for change. For this reason, professionals need to develop soft skills not only in theory but also through effective application in the workplace. Only through practical implementation can interactions between administrative staff and patients be improved, fostering a more humane and collaborative environment.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Far from being an exclusively clinical trait, empathy is a central element in the performance of administrative healthcare staff. When properly integrated, it not only improves communication and conflict resolution but also contributes to a more humane and efficient work environment.

This article highlights the importance of moving soft skills training beyond the individual level and establishing it as an institutional strategy. The incorporation of virtual tools and participatory methodologies can foster sustained empathetic development, with positive effects on both the patient experience and the overall functioning of healthcare teams.

For empathy to become an organizational pillar, institutions must recognize its strategic value and embed it within their management culture and policies. Only a systemic vision—one that connects interpersonal dynamics with structural factors—will allow progress toward a care culture truly centered on dignity, quality, and the well-being of all actors within the system.

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