



Strategies: Putting Empathy in Action

How to put empathy in action as individuals, schools and communities

PRACTICE | TREAT EMPATHY AS A SKILL

IN INDIVIDUALS:

- **Experience it.** Empathy cannot be transmitted through a book or a lecture: “it has to be about construction, not simply instruction,” says Ashoka Fellow [Mary Gordon](#) of [Roots of Empathy](#). It comes of feeling, intuition, and interpersonal connection. Lasting memories—the product of emotional connections rather than mere cognitive understanding—then become a vehicle for applying those lessons outside of the classroom setting.
- **Practice it.** “It’s not what you teach, it’s what you emphasize,” says [Positive Coaching Alliance](#) founder and Ashoka Fellow [Jim Thompson](#). Lessons and experiences must be reinforced through continual practice and repetition. Athletes who constantly improve both themselves and their team, practice what Jim calls “Double Vision”: the ability to take a hard look internally and take responsibility for your actions, and to look around externally, focusing on what’s happening with your teammates and what you can do to help them be successful. PCA coaches use visual gestures as a constant reminder for kids to put what they’ve learned into practice. If a kid is sitting on the bench, the coach holds his hand up as though looking through a window, reminding him or her to focus on the rest of the team and ways to help them out.
- **Measure it.** Empathy is the combination of a number of different skills and aptitudes—the ability to read emotion, to appropriately express emotion, to listen effectively and accept differences, to resolve conflict, and many more—which can be measured independently through a combination of self-assessment, observation, and performance. As with any learning outcome, “we value what we measure,” says [Peace First](#) founder and Ashoka Fellow [Eric Dawson](#). Successful programs both measure students’ empathy along a growth spectrum, and connect empathy to the learning process through clear metrics that help teachers track the skill-development of their students.

IN SCHOOLS:

- **Embed empathy across the curriculum.** For [Eric Dawson](#), founder of [Peace First](#), peace-building is not simply the absence of violence; it is a skill in itself. Peace First schools learn to integrate lessons in peace-building across all subject matter, on some occasions, going so far as to include peace-building as a cross-disciplinary subject on students’ report cards. Through an hour-long course each week, students



learn peace-building just as they would any other subject, beginning in elementary school and going all the way through the 8th grade.

- **Make play the cornerstone of the school day.** Numerous Ashoka Fellows have demonstrated why play matters—not simply as a means of improving health and expending energy, but as a critical learning tool in itself and an essential experience for developing empathy. Through play, kids learn the value of cooperation and how to work effectively in teams. They learn to resolve conflict, and to explore imagined worlds and experiences. And they behave better in class.
- **Activate changemaking.** Applied empathy involves both understanding and acting. Thus, developing empathy does not end with simply “stepping into another’s shoes.” Students at Ashoka Fellow [Kiran Bir Sethi](#)’s Riverside School in India, for example, undertake a four-step experiential learning process: Feel, Think, Do, Share. They identify a problem within their community that they care about, and then carefully examine the causes behind it, looking at a combination of visible factors, non-verbal indicators, and systemic gaps. Then students design solutions to their chosen challenge, putting empathy into action.

IN COMMUNITIES:

- **Train future leaders in systems-thinking.** A common strategy for embedding empathy skillsets across entire communities involves creating transformative life experiences for future leaders, thereby leveraging the “trickle down” effect. Following a rigorous selection process, Ashoka Fellow [Rebecca Onie](#)’s Health Leads trains college volunteers to connect low-income patients with the basic resources—such as food, housing and heating assistance—they need to be healthy. By working side-by-side with doctors, lawyers, social workers, and patients and their families, students quickly learn to take multiple perspectives, and through active listening, discover how to bridge connections between players in the system. The result is a corps of future medical professionals equipped with the knowledge, understanding, and efficacy to identify and tackle the social determinants of health.
- **Uncover, understand, and deconstruct discriminatory attitudes.** Too often, educators and community organizers rely on tools and formulaic interventions to tackle pressing social challenges, without examining the reasons behind their existence, and the means through which they are perpetuated. Through the [People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond](#), Ashoka Fellow [Ron Chisom](#) has pioneered a new approach that allows people to put empathy into practice. He works with government agents, non-profit leaders, educators, and social service providers to understand the foundations of race and racism and how they continually function as a barrier to community self-determination.

CULTURE | CREATE CONDITIONS FOR EMPATHY TO THRIVE

IN INDIVIDUALS:

- **Reverse role dynamics.** Where there are imbalances of power, whether between individuals or at a societal level, the side with power has little incentive to practice empathy. Genuine expressions of empathy thus require reversing traditional roles and doing away with long-standing hierarchies, and both sides must recognize they have something to teach and something to learn. Through Ashoka Fellow [Christa Gannon](#)'s [Fresh Lifelines for Youth \(FLY\)](#), for example, police and probation officers switch roles with incarcerated youth in a “mock trial”, with dramatic impact on both parties.
- **Link “other” awareness to self-awareness.** Imagining what another is feeling begins with careful self-reflection and an examination of the events, people, and circumstances that lead us to behave in a certain way, and ultimately make us who we are. “Empathy is about understanding how a particular set of behaviors have made you feel, and how you’ve demonstrated those same behaviors,” explains Aila Malik, Associate Director of [Fresh Lifelines for Youth](#). Juvenile offenders participating in FLY's leadership development training begin with a close examination of moments in which they have felt oppressed, mistreated, or hurt. Together, they begin to disentangle those feelings from their causes, and to explore moments in which they have acted not as the victim, but as the perpetrator.
- **Unlock motivations through personal stories.** For Ashoka Fellow [Dorothy Stoneman](#)'s [YouthBuild USA](#), building a sense of common purpose among participants is critical to getting the job done and sustaining students' motivation. On their first day together, they begin by sharing their life stories, a process that forces them to look beyond their initial assumptions and stereotypes, and to understand both their personal motivations and those of others.

IN SCHOOLS:

- **Model empathy in the learning environment.** Empathy cannot be learned in isolation; it must be modeled by teacher, principal, and staff behavior. Founded on the belief that to inspire students, you must first inspire teachers, Ashoka Fellow [Aleta Margolis](#)' [Center for Inspired Teaching](#) has spent 15 years helping teachers to reach their full potential. One of the key tenets of her philosophy is that the student-teacher relationship, along with the principal-teacher and principal-student relationships, be one of mutual respect and shared learning, in which each contributes independently to the overall learning community. Using the same participatory and cooperative learning strategies employed in today's best schools, she and other Ashoka Fellows are working to provide educators with transformative



life experiences and chances for deep reflection, so that they too are equipped with empathetic skill.

- **Treat children and young people as clients, not charges.** It's hardly a secret that kids who are acting up in school are often facing other challenges at home. Yet excessive reliance on procedures, combined with too little time, can mean that unique circumstances and “grey areas” affecting individual behavior are overlooked in favor of a rigid application of established rules—with the result that, too often, we treat the symptom rather than the cause. [Fresh Lifelines for Youth](#) founder and Ashoka Fellow [Christa Gannon](#) and Ashoka Fellow [Claudia Vidigal](#) of Brazil's [Making History Institute](#) have established successful alternatives in their respective systems. Christa is reducing recidivism rates by developing mechanisms for the players in the juvenile justice system to listen to young people rather than just punish their behavior. Similarly, Claudia works with youth in shelters to unlock and share their personal stories through writing and the arts, and then feeds those stories back into the hands of the social workers, judges, and other decision-makers in the court system. Kids are thus treated as individuals rather than case numbers.

IN COMMUNITIES:

- **Treat vulnerability as an asset.** Core to unlocking empathy is creating a trust-based environment, often termed a “safe space”—one where vulnerability is a learning asset, where genuine reflection and emotional expression are encouraged, and where traditional boundaries that separate what's happening at school from what's happening at home are absent. This means inviting vulnerability, and allowing individuals to look beyond narrow preconceptions and stereotypes at the person beyond the performance. For example, students at Antioch School of Law, founded by Ashoka Fellow [Edgar Cahn](#), begin classes with an essay about an injustice they were witness to, in which they examine what they did at the time and what they would do now. The first day and a half is spent sharing that story.
- **Highlight shared values.** At its core, empathy is about recognizing the shared humanity in another: approaching others—be they team members or negotiating parties—as equals, and finding ways that advance the good of the whole. Ashoka Fellow [Eboo Patel](#)'s [Interfaith Youth Core](#) is out to create “interfaith literacy”, wherein members of different faiths understand not only one another's specific practices and traditions, but how the two faiths relate to one another. To that end, they use what they call a “Shared Value Methodology,” in which all dialogues and shared service projects begin with a look at the values and personal histories participants share, and what they can do to act on those shared values. Similarly, Ashoka Fellows [Pastor James Wuye](#) and [Imam Mohammed Ashafa](#) of the [Interfaith Mediation Centre](#) have designed a curriculum to combat the idea that one faith is superior to another: a notion commonly advanced through religious instruction in Nigeria, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Through a combination of Peace Clubs, a new curriculum guide, and public dialogue between religious leaders of different faiths, they are



bringing new attention to their religions' shared emphasis on peace and the common humanity of people everywhere.

- **Ritualize shared responsibility.** Ashoka Fellow [Sharon Terry](#) and the [Genetic Alliance](#) have found that the best way to resolve tension and conflict is through what they call “identification.” Whether dealing with a team project or negotiating with partners, they consciously reframe their frustration and complaints in terms of their own contribution to the problem, rather than project blame on others. Instead of saying, “you’re being an obstacle,” staff flip the question to say, “how is it true that I’m being an obstacle?” Both sides thus become partners in solving the problem.

ECOSYSTEM | ESTABLISH INCENTIVES AND PLATFORMS TO PROPEL ACTION

IN INDIVIDUALS:

- **Link empathy to clear action and visible impact.** Traditional attempts to unlock empathy involve loading people with extensive data and statistics about a problem. Yet “part of the problem is that people feel overwhelmed by the whole issue,” explains Ashoka Fellow [Cindy Blackstock](#), founder of the [First Nations Child and Family Caring Society](#). The key, she says, is to offer people simple ways to get involved, and to lay out in clear terms what those actions will accomplish. She has devised a simple—and just as importantly, free—set of steps that can be done in two minutes or less, using these as a door-opener for deeper engagement. Ashoka Fellow [Mark Hanis’ Genocide Intervention Network \(GI-Net\)](#) is expanding on the work of the human rights community—known for its lengthy reports on shocking abuses—by providing global citizens with the tools to more effectively advocate and fundraise to prevent genocide. His technology-driven platform for public action is distributing the power to effect change from a concentrated few to an expansive network of citizen activists. It includes the world’s first anti-genocide hotline that connects callers directly to their Congressional representatives.
- **Link applied empathy to professional development.** First-year students at Ashoka Fellow [Edgar Cahn](#)’s Antioch School of Law are required to complete a six-week homestay with a client family in order to understand a client’s underlying motivations. Similarly, Ashoka Fellow [Bernard Amadei](#)’s [Engineers Without Borders](#) enables engineering students to put their skills to use to help meet the needs of developing communities. Students work hand in hand with local communities to identify a clear need, and to develop a long-term sustainability plan. Having worked hand in hand with the communities they are serving, students return with a deeper appreciation of local knowledge, a commitment to applying their skills for social good, and a deeper understanding of development as a two-way street.

- **Link personal progress to community progress.** While service-learning and volunteerism are widely upheld as a critical means of cultivating civic engagement, programs often suffer from being “service for service’s sake.” [YouthBuild USA](#) takes a new approach. They bring together young people from low-income backgrounds to work together to build affordable housing units. As they collaborate to develop the community, participants learn job skills and earn a high school diploma or GED.

IN SCHOOLS:

- **Include empathy metrics in teacher & school performance standards.** Today’s focus on teacher accountability, while opening the door to innovation and improved performance strategies, has also placed extraordinary burden on today’s educators, with the result that recess, arts-based subjects, and social and emotional learning are often the first to be cut when resources—whether time or money—are scarce. To make empathy more than a tagline, principals must declare it to be a core priority, and rate teachers—and themselves—against schools’ ability to cultivate it. To that end, [Ellen Moir’s New Teacher Center](#) has created a clear set of performance standards for principals and teachers that rate their efforts to improve their schools’ social and emotional well-being. Principals are rated on their ability to put themselves in the teacher’s place, and teachers are evaluated based on their ability to do the same with their students. Having made mentorship for new teachers a core education policy in dozens of districts throughout the country, she is working with those same administrators to spread the tool.

IN COMMUNITIES:

- **Capture “psychic income.”** [Edgar Cahn](#) has designed an alternative currency system to reward neighborly acts of kindness and volunteerism. At first, he feared this new system—called TimeBanks—would be of use only for those at the bottom of the economic ladder, who lacked any other form of currency. But he found that there are two kinds of benefit: one based on exchange, and one based on intrinsic value and the sense that you’re contributing to something bigger than yourself. Time Banks captures both, allowing users to exchange one hour of services given for one hour of services received. As a result of this psychic benefit, the supply of volunteers and people wanting to offer time has exceeded demand ever since Time Banks’ first inception.
- **Showcase the triple-bottom line.** Too often, empathy is looked upon as a “nice to have,” bearing little relationship to personal or economic performance. Across fields, Ashoka Fellows are replacing false dichotomies mired in “either/or” thinking with a triple-bottom line mindset. The result is a growing recognition that students learn best in a safe and emotionally supportive environment; that the best teams in sports are those that are both competitive and cooperative; and that the most effective business practices promote social and environmental benefit in addition to profit.