

# The Engagement Crisis Is a Manager Empathy Crisis

*Why the management pipeline is failing on empathy — what capabilities are missing, and how to build them*

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## — A B S T R A C T

*Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report identifies the manager as the single most powerful variable in employee engagement — accounting for 70% of the variance in team engagement scores. Yet the UK management pipeline has a persistent and well-documented empathy deficit. This paper examines which specific empathy capabilities are absent in the majority of UK managers, why conventional training approaches have failed to develop them, and what a different approach looks like. The argument is not that managers are uncaring. It is that they are undertrained in the physical, embodied dimensions of empathy that determine how they show up under pressure, in difficult conversations, and in the moments that decide whether people stay or leave.*

# Your engagement strategy lives or dies in the management relationship.

<b>The Crisis</b>	<b>The Gap</b>	<b>The Fix</b>
<p>Only 10% of UK employees are engaged at work. The research is unambiguous about the cause: the quality of the manager relationship is the primary driver of engagement, and it is failing.</p> <p>This is not a recruitment problem. It is a development problem — specifically, a failure to build the empathy capabilities that management requires.</p>	<p>UK managers are typically well-trained in process, strategy, and task management. They are systematically undertrained in the three dimensions of empathy that determine how they behave under pressure: physical attunement, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking in real time.</p> <p>Awareness of empathy is not the same as the capacity to practise it. Most training produces the former.</p>	<p>The empathy capabilities missing from the management pipeline are trainable. They require physical practice, not cognitive instruction. They need to be embedded over time, not delivered in events.</p> <p>Organisations that invest in building these capabilities see measurable improvements in retention, engagement scores, and the quality of difficult conversations.</p>

— — THE CORE ARGUMENT

*The engagement crisis is not a mystery. It has a cause, and that cause is measurable. Gallup tells us the manager accounts for 70% of the variance in team engagement. What Gallup does not tell us — because most engagement research stops at diagnosis — is which specific capabilities managers need and don't currently have. This paper answers that question. The missing capabilities are not cognitive. They are physical: the embodied, instinctive, trainable skills of attunement that determine how a manager reads a room, conducts a difficult conversation, or responds to a team member who is struggling.*

The gap can be closed. But not by the kind of training that currently dominates the management development landscape. It requires a different model — one grounded in physical practice, pressure-testing, and habit formation over time.

— THIS PAPER COVERS

<p><b>1. The engagement data</b></p> <p>What Gallup and CIPD tell us about the scale of the problem — and why the manager relationship is the lever.</p> <p><b>2. The empathy capabilities that determine manager effectiveness</b></p> <p>The three dimensions of empathy — cognitive, emotional, physical — and which ones are systematically absent.</p> <p><b>3. Why the pipeline fails to develop them</b></p> <p>The structural reasons management development produces awareness but not the physical capacity to act differently.</p> <p><b>4. The power problem</b></p> <p>Why empathy training that ignores organisational power dynamics is fragile — and what this means for design.</p>	<p><b>5. What capable managers actually do differently</b></p> <p>The observable behaviours that distinguish high-empathy managers — and what they have in common.</p> <p><b>6. What effective development requires</b></p> <p>The characteristics of management development that actually changes how managers behave under pressure.</p> <p><b>7. Evidence from practice</b></p> <p>Four case studies across sectors.</p> <p><b>8. Practical application and references</b></p> <p>Where to start, and how to build the internal case.</p>
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## The Manager Is Your Engagement Strategy

If your organisation's engagement scores have not materially improved despite investment in training, wellbeing programmes, and culture initiatives, the most likely explanation is not that you have the wrong strategy. It is that you have the wrong lever. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2024 identifies the manager as the single most powerful variable in team engagement — responsible for 70% of the variance in engagement scores. Not pay. Not purpose. Not leadership vision. The direct manager, in the daily micro-interactions that determine whether people feel heard, valued, and willing to bring their best work.

The economic cost of disengagement in the UK is estimated at £340 billion annually in lost productivity (Gallup, 2024). The human cost — people spending most of their working lives feeling invisible to the person who manages them — is harder to quantify but no less real.

And the Chartered Management Institute's finding that 82% of UK managers receive no formal preparation before appointment means that most organisations are relying on people who have never been trained in the most important thing their role requires: the empathy-dependent skills of building relationships, navigating conflict, and creating conditions in which others can perform. People do not leave companies. They leave managers.

This paper argues that the reason management development investment has not closed the engagement gap is specific and fixable. It is not that organisations are training the wrong managers or spending too little. It is that the training is targeting the wrong dimension of empathy. Cognitive and emotional empathy — the dimensions that current programmes predominantly address — are necessary but insufficient. The dimension that determines how a manager actually behaves in a difficult moment is physical: the embodied, habituated capacity to read and respond to what people are signalling before they say it, to stay present under pressure, and to make someone feel genuinely heard rather than processed. This is the dimension that is almost entirely absent from the UK management development pipeline — and it is the one that engagement depends on.

### The numbers in brief

**10%** of UK employees are engaged at work (Gallup, 2024)

**£340bn** annual cost of UK workplace disengagement (Gallup, 2024)

**70%** of team engagement variance is explained by the manager (Gallup, 2024)

**£5.7bn** spent annually on management training in the UK (CIPD, 2024)

**82%** of UK managers are appointed without any formal management training (CMI, 2023)

The 82% figure from the Chartered Management Institute is perhaps the most striking of all. The majority of UK managers are managing people without any formal preparation for the role. They are promoted because they were good at doing something — a technical role, a specialist function, a high-performing individual contributor position — and then asked to do something structurally different: to build relationships, motivate people, navigate conflict, and create conditions in which others can perform. These are empathy-dependent skills. And most newly appointed managers have never been trained in them. The result is predictable. Managers who are highly capable technically but relationally underprepared default to what they know: task management, process oversight, directive communication. They manage outputs rather than people. They are not unkind — most want to be good managers — but they lack the physical, embodied empathy skills that good management requires under pressure. And the gap shows up directly in the engagement data.

# The Empathy Capabilities That Determine Manager Effectiveness

Empathy is not a single skill. The research literature consistently identifies at least three distinct dimensions, each with different neural substrates, different developmental pathways, and different implications for training. Understanding the distinction matters for management development because the three dimensions fail differently, and they respond to different kinds of intervention.

DIMENSION	WHAT IT IS	WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN IN MANAGEMENT
<b>Cognitive Empathy</b>	The intellectual capacity to understand another person’s perspective, reasoning, and emotional state. Often described as perspective-taking. Trainable through reflection, feedback, and awareness-raising.	Managers understand in the abstract that a team member is struggling, but this understanding does not change how they respond in the moment. The pressure gap: knowing and doing remain separate.
<b>Emotional Empathy</b>	The capacity to resonate with and be affected by another’s emotional state. To feel, at least partially, what another person feels. Requires emotional regulation — the ability to be affected without being overwhelmed.	Managers who lack emotional empathy are experienced as cold or transactional. Those who have it but cannot regulate it become overwhelmed or burned out. Both failure modes are common in the UK management pipeline.
<b>Physical Empathy</b>	The embodied, instinctive capacity to attune to another person through body language, micro-expressions, tone, and physical presence. Operates beneath conscious awareness and is the first dimension to activate in any interaction. Directly trainable through physical practice.	This is the dimension most systematically absent from management development. Because it operates below conscious awareness, it is rarely discussed. Because it requires physical practice rather than cognitive instruction, conventional training does not develop it.

Of the three dimensions, physical empathy is the most important for management effectiveness under pressure — and the least developed. The reason is structural. Physical empathy operates before conscious awareness: a manager who walks into a meeting room has already begun attuning to the people in it before they have said a word. The quality of that attunement — whether they notice tension, read discomfort, sense who is disengaged — is determined not by their cognitive understanding of empathy but by their physical

training. It is a body skill, developed through repeated practice.

The management pipeline currently produces cognitive empathy at best. Emotional empathy is addressed, if at all, through self-reflection and feedback. Physical empathy is almost never addressed, because most management development programmes are not designed around it. The result is managers who understand empathy intellectually, and may even score reasonably on emotional intelligence assessments, but who lack the embodied capacity to practise it in the moments that most demand it.

## Why the Pipeline Fails to Develop Them

If the empathy capabilities required for effective management are trainable, the obvious question is why the management pipeline consistently fails to develop them. The answer lies not in the quality of management development as an aspiration, but in its dominant design.

### The promotion problem

The most common route into management in UK organisations is promotion from a high-performing individual contributor role. The logic is straightforward: if someone is excellent at their job, they are trusted with a team. The problem is that the skills that produce high individual performance — technical expertise, independent execution, analytical capability — are largely orthogonal to the skills required for management. Managing people requires empathy, relational attunement, and the capacity to motivate and develop others. None of these are measured or developed in most individual contributor roles.

The Chartered Management Institute's research finding that 82% of UK managers receive no formal management training before appointment is, in this context, less a finding about training provision and more a finding about cultural assumptions: that management is an extension of doing, rather than a fundamentally different kind of work. Those assumptions are embedded in how promotions are made, how performance is measured, and how development budgets are allocated.

### The awareness trap

For those managers who do receive development support, the dominant model is awareness-based. Programmes built around personality profiling, emotional intelligence frameworks, 360-degree feedback, and reflective practice are genuinely good at producing insight. What they produce is managers who understand themselves and others better — who can name what they observe, articulate what they value, and identify what they wish they had done differently. What they do not reliably produce is a manager who responds differently at 9am on a Monday when a team member is in distress and a deadline is pressing.

The specific failure for managers is this: the management relationship is played out in real time, under pressure, in the body. It is not played out in a reflective journal or a feedback debrief. A manager who has deepened their self-awareness through profiling and 360 feedback still has to walk into the room. And in the room, what determines how they behave is not their insight but their habits — the automatic physical patterns that have been laid down through years of practice, mostly unexamined. Awareness of those patterns does not change them. Only repeated physical practice in realistic conditions does. As one project manager in a high-stress tech environment put it: 'I used to think empathy meant giving up ground. Now I see it is about staying grounded myself — so I can actually hear what is underneath someone's frustration.' That shift is not a cognitive one. It is a physical one, and

it is described in detail in *How to Train an Empath* (Nolan, 2025).

### **The event model**

A further structural problem is what might be called the calendar assumption: that management development is an event to schedule rather than a practice to embed. The off-site, the annual training day, the half-day module on empathy: these are designed to fit into the management calendar. What they are not designed to do is change what happens in the other 250 days of the year. Management capability, including the empathy dimensions that determine whether people stay and perform, is built through daily micro-interactions: the quality of attention at the start of a one-to-one, the way a manager enters a room, the pause before reacting that signals presence rather than impatience. These are not skills that a training day can install. They are habits, built through deliberate, repeated practice embedded in the actual work.

The managers who make the most durable change are those who build small, consistent practices into the rhythms of their work. One team lead at a technology company described the shift: ‘Every Monday now, we start with two minutes of real check-in. Not “How was your weekend?” but “What is one thing on your mind that might affect how you show up today?” It changed the tone of our meetings completely.’ That practice did not come from a training day. It came from learning, through physical empathy training, to pay a different quality of attention — and then finding a form for that attention that could survive contact with a busy working week. The practice is described in *How to Train an Empath* (Nolan, 2025).

*“Cultivating empathy in leadership is not just about listening well in the room. It is also about recognising whose voices shape the room’s impact after the session ends.”*

— Stuart Nolan, *How to Train an Empath*, 2025

## The Power Problem

There is a dimension of the management empathy gap that is rarely discussed in leadership development literature, because it is uncomfortable: the relationship between power and empathy. Research is consistent and unambiguous on the point. People with greater social or institutional power exhibit systematically lower levels of empathy. They are less likely to perceive others' emotional states accurately, less likely to take perspectives that differ from their own, and less inclined to modify their behaviour in response to others' needs.

The mechanism is not malice. It is attention. Power reduces the perceived need to attend closely to others. When you hold positional authority, you need to read the room less — because the room, in most organisational settings, will orient itself to you. The result, over time, is an atrophying of exactly the attentional skills that empathy requires. The more senior a manager, the more likely they are to have had years of experience in which close attunement to others was not required for effectiveness. The empathy muscles that were developing early in their career have, in many cases, been exercised less and less as authority increased.

### When the person who shapes outcomes isn't in the room

The power problem has a second manifestation that is equally important for organisational development professionals to understand: the person who determines whether empathy training produces systemic change is often not the person in the training room.

This dynamic shows up repeatedly in practice. A team or leadership group engages genuinely with empathy development. Real shifts happen. People listen differently, communicate more honestly, navigate conflict with more skill. And then those changes fail to translate into lasting organisational impact — because a more senior person, who was not part of the programme, operates from a different set of assumptions and holds enough power to override the new direction.

The lesson is not that empathy training is futile without universal buy-in from the top. It is that programme design which ignores organisational power dynamics is structurally fragile. Effective empathy development in organisations needs a theory of change that accounts for where power actually sits, who needs to be involved for change to hold, and how to build the conditions in which new behaviours can survive contact with existing hierarchies.

### The hyper-empathy problem

The power gradient also runs in the other direction. Research shows that people at the lower end of organisational hierarchies often develop what might be called hyper-empathy — a heightened vigilance to the emotional states of those above them, driven by the practical necessity of reading and anticipating the responses of people with power over their working lives. This is not a capacity to be celebrated uncritically: it is frequently exhausting, and it contributes significantly to the empathic depletion and burnout that is prevalent among

frontline workers, junior staff, and people in caring professions.

Management development that addresses only the empathy deficit of those with power — without also considering the cost of chronic hyper-empathy in those without it — is incomplete. Effective empathy training in organisations needs to work at both ends: developing the attentional capacity of those whose empathy has atrophied through seniority, and providing the skills of regulation and boundary-setting to those whose empathy is being depleted through overuse.

These dynamics show up in practice with striking consistency. A junior team member in a corporate training put it quietly: ‘I’ve gotten so good at reading what people in power want to hear, I’m not sure I even know what I’d say if I felt safe.’ At the other end of the hierarchy, a senior leader admitted: ‘It’s hard to get honest feedback when people are watching your facial expression more than your words.’ And one senior executive, after an internal leadership workshop, said: ‘It finally clicked for me — empathy isn’t me being generous. It’s me being teachable.’ All three are cited in *How to Train an Empath* (Nolan, 2025).

*“Empathy isn’t me being generous. It’s me being teachable.”*

— Senior executive, cited in *How to Train an Empath*, 2025

## What High-Empathy Managers Do Differently

The research literature on management effectiveness, taken together with fifteen years of applied practice across more than 2,500 participants, points to a consistent set of observable behaviours that distinguish managers with high physical empathy capability from those without it. These are not personality traits. They are learned, practised behaviours — which means they can be developed.

### — — FIVE OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOURS

- **They read the room before speaking:** High-empathy managers pause before they enter a conversation. They attend to the physical and emotional state of the person or group in front of them before deciding how to proceed. This is not a technique — it is a trained attentional habit.
- **They notice what is not being said:** The ability to read non-verbal signals — posture, micro-expression, tone, silence — is a physical skill, developed through practice. High-empathy managers catch the signals that others miss, and respond to the whole communication rather than just the words.
- **They regulate themselves under pressure:** When a conversation becomes difficult or emotionally charged, high-empathy managers do not become defensive, withdraw, or override the emotional content with task management. They remain physically present and responsive. This requires somatic self-awareness — an understanding of their own physical responses under stress — that most management development does not address.
- **They adapt in real time:** Rather than applying a fixed communication style regardless of context, high-empathy managers attune to the person in front of them and adjust. This is not people-pleasing or lack of authority. It is the application of physical empathy to communication — meeting people where they are rather than where you need them to be.
- **They create the conditions for honest conversation:** People tell high-empathy managers things they do not tell others. Not because they are asked to, but because the physical signals of genuine attentiveness — presence, eye contact, body orientation, the absence of distraction — create the safety to speak. This is measurable: it shows up in psychological safety scores, in retention conversations, and in exit interview data.

What these five behaviours have in common is that none of them can be produced by cognitive understanding alone. A manager can read extensively about active listening and still be physically absent in a one-to-one. They can understand intellectually that body language matters and still cross their arms and look at their phone when a team member is

speaking. The behaviours described above are the product of physical training — of habits that have been built through repeated practice until they become available automatically, including under pressure.

This is the core argument of this paper. The management pipeline is not failing because UK managers are unaware of empathy. Many are highly aware of it. It is failing because awareness has been confused with capability — and capability, in the physical domain, is only produced by practice.

## What Effective Development Requires

The research literature on management effectiveness, taken together with fifteen years of applied practice across more than 2,500 participants, points to a consistent set of observable behaviours that distinguish managers with high physical empathy capability from those without it. These are not personality traits. They are learned, practised behaviours — which means they can be developed. The full methodology is laid out in *How to Train an Empath: Lessons from a Professional Mindreader* (Nolan, 2025); what follows here is the observable picture of what effective development produces.

### In the One-to-One

The one-to-one is the most important management context for empathy, and the one most consistently undermined by poor physical presence. A manager who enters the meeting still physically carrying the tension of the previous conversation — tight shoulders, shallow breath, the postural signals of distraction — communicates unavailability before they say a word. The team member responds not to what the manager intends but to what the manager's body is broadcasting. Managers with high physical empathy capability enter a one-to-one with an active reset: they arrive physically, not just on time. They notice their own state and the other person's within the first minute. They can detect from posture, breath, and micro-movement whether the team member is withholding something important — and they have the attentional stillness to wait for it to surface rather than filling the silence with task agenda.

### In the Difficult Conversation

Difficult conversations — performance concerns, conflict between team members, unwelcome feedback, redundancy — are the moments where the empathy gap shows up most vividly. Most managers manage these moments by managing their own discomfort: they rush to conclusions, soften the message past recognition, or adopt a deliberate neutrality that the other person experiences as coldness. Managers with high physical empathy capability do something different: they stay in their own body during the discomfort of the other person. They do not deflect, minimise, or fix. They remain physically present — open posture, steady breath, genuine attentiveness — in a way that communicates that they can bear witness to difficulty without being overwhelmed by it. This is what makes people feel genuinely heard rather than managed.

### In the Team Meeting

In a team meeting, the manager's body sets the room's register before any agenda item is discussed. A manager who enters hurried, visibly preoccupied, and postured for efficiency signals that the meeting is a transaction. A manager who arrives settled and physically oriented toward the group signals that the meeting is a space. Managers with high physical

empathy capability can read the group's state rapidly and accurately: who is tense, who is disengaged, who is holding a reaction that has not been voiced. They adjust their approach in real time — not by running through a checklist but by responding to what the room is actually doing. The result is meetings where the things that need to be said get said, rather than being held until a corridor conversation afterwards.

## **Under Pressure**

This is the decisive test. Under pressure — a restructure, a missed target, a team in conflict, a crisis — most managers narrow. Their attention contracts, their physical presence closes, and they default to control and direction. This is neurologically predictable: under stress, the body prioritises threat response over social attunement. The manager who has only cognitive empathy skills loses access to them precisely when they are most needed. The manager who has trained the physical dimension retains a different kind of access: not a recalled principle but a habituated physical capacity that remains functional under pressure. They can still read the room. They can still be present to a team member who is struggling. They can still make the person in front of them feel that, in this moment, they matter.

*“I caught myself halfway through a one-on-one thinking about what I was going to say next. I literally said, ‘Wait... let me come back to you.’ Then I reset. The conversation that followed was completely different.”*

— Senior manager, cited in *How to Train an Empath*, 2025

## Evidence From Practice

The following case studies are drawn from engagements described in Stuart Nolan’s practice research, published in *How to Train an Empath* (2025). Organisations are identified by sector. Each illustrates one or more of the dynamics described in this paper — the empathy gap in management, the failure of awareness-based approaches, or the power dynamics that determine whether training translates into lasting change.

### UK University Senior Management Team

Higher Education — UK

#### CHALLENGE

A major UK university was navigating significant sector pressures: structural funding shifts, demands for strategic agility, and deepening tensions between departments. Senior leadership had a track record of investment in conventional management development. What they had not previously done was address the relational and empathic dimensions of how the senior team itself operated.

#### APPROACH

Several days of facilitated empathy development using physical attunement exercises and structured perspective-taking. Deans, heads of department, and senior administrators worked across departmental lines on exercises designed to surface long-standing tensions and build genuine attunement between people who had previously engaged primarily in positional negotiation. The group reached a level of honest engagement that multiple participants described as unprecedented — a genuine co-creation of shared strategy.

#### OUTCOME

The alignment produced in the sessions did not hold. A Pro Vice-Chancellor who had not been part of the programme chose to dismiss the outcomes and impose a different direction unilaterally. The lesson was not that the development had failed — the quality of the work within the group was real. It was that empathy without organisational reach is fragile. Where power is disconnected from participation, development produces insight but not systemic change. This case directly shaped the framework for organisational reach described in Section 6.

# NHS Leadership Programme

Healthcare — NHS R&D North West

## CHALLENGE

Healthcare leaders on an NHS leadership programme were skilled managers, but the empathic demands of leading clinical teams — managing the emotional intensity of clinical environments while maintaining research and innovation capacity — were producing burnout and relational breakdown at team level. Prior leadership development had addressed skills and strategy but not the physical and emotional dimensions of empathic management.

## APPROACH

Physical empathy training was integrated into the leadership programme as a core rather than supplementary component. Participants worked on attentional training, somatic self-awareness, and the distinction between empathy and empathic distress — developing the regulatory capacity to be genuinely present to others without being overwhelmed. The training mapped directly onto the NHS Leading With Care framework, giving participants a language and practice for what the framework required but did not specify.

## OUTCOME

Participants described the training as qualitatively different from anything they had encountered in previous leadership development. One NHS leader reflected: ‘I’ve had trainings where people talked at me about empathy. This is the first one where I understood it without being told.’ The approach has been embedded in NHS leadership programmes in the region since 2015, and has been evaluated longitudinally using Pawson and Tilley realist evaluation methodology.

# National Innovation Organisation

Public Sector — UK

## CHALLENGE

A national innovation body was undergoing significant organisational restructuring. The challenge was not strategic disagreement — leadership alignment on direction was strong — but relational: the process of restructuring had created uncertainty, eroded trust in middle management, and produced a significant gap between what senior leaders believed was being communicated and what staff were experiencing.

## APPROACH

Empathy Training was used to support the senior leadership team through the restructuring process, focusing on the physical and relational skills of communicating change: reading how messages were landing in real time, adapting to the emotional state of the people receiving difficult news, and maintaining genuine presence under the pressure of organisational transition. The work was iterative rather than event-based, with multiple sessions over the course of the restructuring.

## OUTCOME

The restructuring process was completed with markedly less attrition than comparable organisational change programmes. Leadership reported that the empathy training had changed how they approached communication under pressure — less focused on delivering messages and more focused on attending to how those messages were being received. One senior leader described it as learning to listen to the room rather than to their own script.

# Media Organisation Board

Media Sector — UK

## CHALLENGE

A media organisation with a board that included executive and non-executive directors was experiencing persistent difficulty in board dynamics: conversations that were technically competent but relationally brittle, with members skilled at making arguments but less skilled at genuinely attending to the perspectives of others. The pattern was affecting decision quality and beginning to impact the organisation's culture more broadly.

## APPROACH

Physical empathy training was delivered to the board as a whole, using attunement exercises adapted for a senior group that was professionally sophisticated but sceptical of anything that felt like 'soft skills' training. The approach was evidence-based and direct: this is what physical empathy is, this is how it works neurologically, this is what we are going to practise, and this is how it maps onto the specific conversations this board needs to have better.

## OUTCOME

The board reported a measurable shift in the quality of debate within sessions. Members who had previously dominated conversations began attending to others more carefully; those who had habitually deferred began contributing with more confidence. The organisation subsequently commissioned a broader empathy programme for its management team, using the board's experience as the internal case.

# What a Manager Empathy Programme Actually Looks Like

The question most senior leaders and People Directors ask at this point is a fair one: if awareness-based training does not produce the change, what does? This section describes what effective physical empathy development for managers looks like in practice — not as an abstract principle but as a structured programme with a sequence, a logic, and measurable outcomes at each stage.

## The programme sequence

Effective physical empathy development for managers is not a single event. It is a sequence of structured interventions, each building on the last, designed to move from awareness through practice to embedded habit. The sequence described here reflects fifteen years of applied practice and the outcomes documented in *How to Train an Empath* (Nolan, 2025). The first stage is diagnostic: understanding which dimensions of empathy are present and which are absent in the management cohort. This involves structured observation of real management interactions — one-to-ones, team meetings, difficult conversations — rather than self-report questionnaires alone. The diagnostic produces a baseline against which all subsequent change is measured. It also identifies the specific contexts where the empathy gap is costing the organisation most: the conversations that go badly, the team members who feel unheard, the conflicts that sit unresolved.

## The twelve-month arc

A well-designed management empathy programme runs over twelve months. The first three months focus on foundation: the physical empathy training itself, delivered in cohorts of eight to sixteen managers, building the core attentional and somatic skills through structured practice with pen, paper, and thread. The exercises are accessible to the sceptical and require no prior experience of personal development work.

PHASE	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT CHANGES
<b>Keynote Talk</b>	Months 1–3: Foundation. Physical empathy training in cohorts. Managers build attentional and somatic skills through practice. Habit formation begins.	Demonstrates physical empathy in practice. Creates curiosity and builds the internal case for deeper work. From £1,500.

<b>Months 4–6: Embedding</b>	Practices are integrated into daily management rhythms. Weekly micro-habits: check-in quality, physical reset before difficult conversations, post-meeting reflection.	The habits formed in months 1–3 begin to operate automatically. Managers report staying present in situations that previously triggered defensive or directive responses. Team members begin to notice.
<b>Empathy Audit</b>	Organisations with persistent engagement, retention, or management effectiveness challenges	Diagnostic identification of where the empathy gap is and what it is costing, followed by a bespoke programme designed around the specific failure modes present. From £4,500.
<b>Full Programme</b>	Months 7–12: Measurement and consolidation. Formal review against pre-agreed KPIs. Embedding sessions address the power dynamics identified in the diagnostic. Outcomes tracked and reported.	Engagement scores in trained managers' teams show measurable improvement. Retention rates, conflict resolution time, and psychological safety ratings are tracked against baseline. ROI is calculable.

## What to measure and when

The most common measurement mistake is timing. Post-training satisfaction surveys are collected within days of the training, before any behaviour change has had time to occur. For management empathy development, the meaningful measurement window is six to twelve months — long enough for habits to form, for team members to experience a different quality of management, and for the business metrics to move.

The metrics that matter are: team engagement scores in trained managers' teams (tracked against untrained peers as a control group); staff retention rates; scores on engagement survey items specifically relating to feeling heard and understood; psychological safety ratings; and time-to-resolution for interpersonal conflicts. These are the metrics on which management failure currently shows up as cost. They are also the metrics on which physical empathy training produces the most consistent and measurable results.

## — CONCLUSION

# The Gap Is Closable

The UK management empathy gap is not inevitable. It is the product of a development model that is incomplete by design: one that trains cognition but not the body, produces awareness but not habit, and measures satisfaction rather than behaviour. The research is consistent and the evidence from practice confirms it: the empathy capabilities that determine whether a manager retains their people, has honest conversations, and creates conditions for performance are physical, trainable, and measurable.

Gallup tells us the manager is the variable. Fifteen years of applied practice tells us which capabilities make the difference — and how to build them. The organisations that do this work do not just improve their engagement scores. They produce managers who are genuinely better at the most human and most demanding part of the job: being present to another person when it matters, in the moments when everything else is pressing.

That is not a soft outcome. It is the mechanism by which people stay, perform, and bring their best work to bear on the things an organisation most needs to do well. The full methodology — what the training involves, what it produces, and how organisations have implemented it across sectors — is set out in *How to Train an Empath: Lessons from a Professional Mindreader* (Nolan, 2025), available at [stuartnolan.com](http://stuartnolan.com).

— — WORK WITH STUART NOLAN CONSULTING

## Empathy training that changes behaviour.

Stuart Nolan Consulting works with senior leadership teams, HR directors, and learning and development functions across the UK and internationally. Every engagement begins with a free 30-minute discovery call to understand your specific context, the empathy gaps most relevant to your organisation, and what a programme designed for your situation would look like.

**Keynote Talk** · From £1,500 — Experiential introduction for events and leadership conferences.

**Workshop or Lab** · From £3,500 — Half-day immersive team training, 8–30 participants.

**Empathy Audit** · From £4,500 — Diagnostic + bespoke programme design, organisation-wide.

**Full Programme** · From £12,000 — Multi-cohort, 6–12 months, with measurement and ROI tracking.

### Get in touch

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— — ABOUT THE BOOK

***How to Train an Empath: Lessons from a Professional Mindreader*** (Stuart Nolan, Billet Publishing, 2025) sets out the full evidence base, methodology, and practice framework for the physical empathy training described in this series — including complete case studies, participant accounts, and implementation tools. Available at [stuartnolan.com/book](https://stuartnolan.com/book)

## — REFERENCES

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