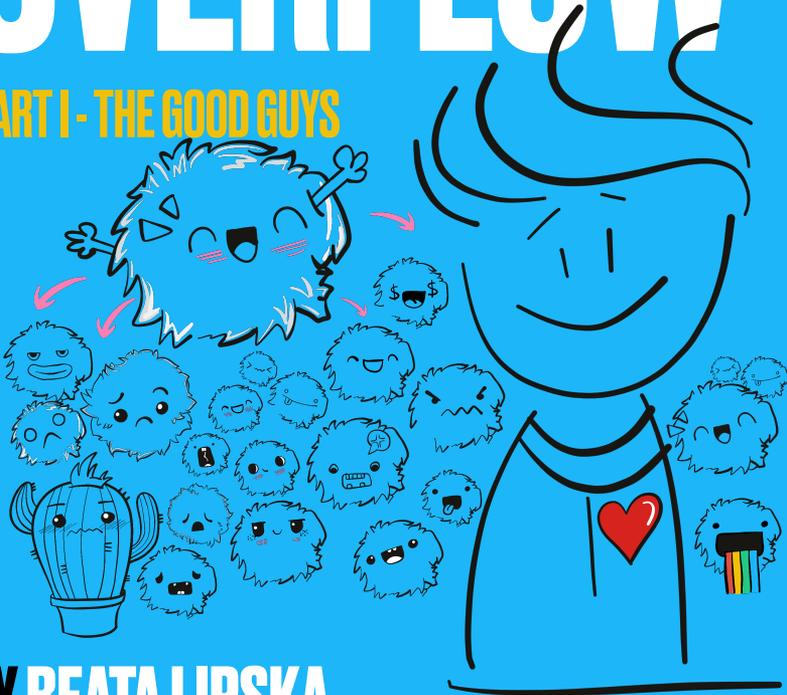


**PRACTICAL SOFT SKILLS GUIDE (NOT)
ONLY FOR SOFTWARE ENGINEERS**

FLUFF OVERFLOW

PART I - THE GOOD GUYS



BY BEATA LIPSKA

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**PART 1 - YOUR ALLIES “THE
GOOD GUYS”**

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I dedicate this book to my Wife because behind every great masterpiece stands a wife. So obviously I had to get married in order to write something wonderful.

Special thanks go to my Parents, my Sister and my Son, who not only gave me the tools necessary to exist in this strange and cruel world but also shaped me as a human being. The experience of being a child, a sister and a parent have had the biggest impact on my personality. Thank you!

PROLOGUE

HOW WAS THIS BOOK WRITTEN?

The book you're reading right now is a result of trial and error, internet challenges (such as “#30daysBreakfast” or “#30DevChallenge”) failures. This time I said to myself: Beatka, if anything, you can do this, advent calendar has only twenty-four days. And this time I'll publish something every day. I promised it to myself. Only... how many times in the past did I promise myself to do something and then failed? The first time I did a similar thing that was when as a 10-year-old girl I came up with the “Double Holidays” plan. The idea was to go to sleep at midnight and get up at 6 am every day. Considering that my usual wake up time was midday, I worked out that by giving myself an extra 6 waking hours, I will extend my holidays time! How do you think I did? You guessed it.

And now, in the middle of the raging pandemic, when one day bleeds into the next, I felt the need to find myself some form of entertainment and a sense of purpose. An activity that would make a difference to those dragging, identical days. December, the month of anticipation and expectation, seemed like the perfect time for it. I could take up the challenge – the advent calendar challenge. The timetable was straightforward – to begin on the 1st of December and to finish on Christmas Eve. The question remained – what should I write about? I thought it ought to be 24 days of something I'm absolutely passionate about, and something

that partly involves my work. Something I know a lot about. But that got my inner critic, who controls my self-doubt, to set off alarm bells with a message: Are you nuts? Are you going to be publishing programming content for 24 days? There are already experts on that! And I had no choice but to agree with my inner critic. Seriously, how can I possibly contribute to the field? I love programming and it is my hobby, but let's face it, I'm no expert. Having said that, I've got another passion, which also involves my work, and which I get even more psyched about. That passion is people. Yes, people excite me. You must be sitting there wondering what's wrong with me. There are no other species equally despicable to humans. We destroy our planet, we are full of envy, we bring chaos to order – how is that fascinating? To me – it is.

To most people IT field means just working with machines, which are computers. I see it as working on problem-solving, that is supported by computers. We are an industry of creative people, and creativity is definitely a human quality. What is more, it is a skill. And this is what this book is about.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

Initially, I was planning to address this book mainly to software developers. Yes, I know, from the stereotypical point of view it seems like a tough nut to crack because generally software developers are thought to be introverts, avoiding human contact. You can hear some of them say “I haven't become a software engineer in order to talk to people.”

Contrary to this assumption, however, this is true for only a small percentage of cases. Obviously, no software developer quits their job because of a broken computer, or because they work in the wrong “cloud”. They leave when they have a bad relationship with the team, or with the manager. What is more, I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but soft skills are key in higher career levels, not only in IT.

Since we’ve established, that we do work as part of a team, then we must be able to communicate, cooperate, maybe even... like other people? So, if you are considering purchasing another online tech course, then perhaps it might be worth also taking care of a different set of skills, other than the hard ones? Although it’s not an easy subject. It requires working on yourself and that can be a hard job if you’re set in your ways. You’ve made the first step now – you’re holding this book (or listening to the audiobook). Now it is time to make a hard decision about developing your soft skills. So:

- ➔ if you want to cooperate more effectively with others
- ➔ if you don’t want to be perceived as an arrogant swine
- ➔ if you want to get promoted to a manager
- ➔ if you want to work more effectively with the business
- ➔ if you’re struggling with imposter syndrome
- ➔ if you’re suffering from work anxiety
- ➔ if you want to work more productively
- ➔ if you want to discover something new about yourself
- ➔ if you want to improve your relationships with the rest of the team
- ➔ if you prefer picture books instead of books with large amounts of text (like me, I’m dyslexic) and enjoy doodling on books (I do too), to make them your own
- ➔ ... or if you want to live a better, calmer life...

...then this book is for you. If, however, you don't tick any of the boxes above, have a think, put the book away (it has been carefully designed to look charming on your bookshelf) and come back to it later. If and if you're reading it as an e-book, look at the pictures, they will make you feel better.

WHAT WILL THIS BOOK CHANGE?

Nothing, you are the one who needs to want to change things around. The purpose of this book is to give you a good time and make you feel good. That's why I designed some fun tasks, just like in the children's books, so you can learn through play. We learn the most when we are having fun. I want to show you that soft skills are cool are they are worth learning. For example – trust. I bet there is someone in your life that you put trust in, you are able to practise trust, but have you ever focused on trust at work? Do you trust your co-workers? Do you trust yourself and your skills? Are you trustworthy? What if you're not? How do you change that? I'll take you on a little journey through the skills you have probably never paid much attention to, and you should have. Why? Because you don't just work with the computer, you work with people and for people, whatever it is you're doing.

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PART I The Good Guys



PART I - THE GOOD GUYS - ALLIES

Part one is just the beginning of the journey into ourselves. In this part, we will talk about a group of positive soft skills, such as empathy, creativity, pragmatism, critical thinking, trust, self-confidence, curiosity and communication. Looking at the drawing above, try guessing which fluff represents which skill. I'll give you a hint; there are several types of communication: verbal, non-verbal, visual and active listening. If you have these skills, you are on the right track to being an even better programmer. And this is the main goal of this book. You will find out what these skills are, how to develop them and when to use each one of them. Have fun!

1.

EMPATHY



WHAT IS EMPATHY?

You must be thinking: „why are we beginning with empathy, it’s incredibly boring!”

To which I’ll respond: there is no other way around it. Empathy is a must. Once you make friends with it, it will always accompany you in many situations, especially those involving other people, remember? Such is the aim of this book – working on yourself for yourself and for others. But how will I benefit from being empathetic? – you may ask. So...

Empathy is connected to all the other fluffs (soft skills) and is very popular among them. It also likes the others, because it understands them. Absolutely each and every one. Empathy links them all together. Its main aim is integrity; empathy added to other fluffs creates something new. For example, critical thinking with even just a hint of empathy results in inclusive solutions. Meanwhile, if we use critical thinking on its own, we may as well solve the problem, but only to a limited group of recipients. Is that what we want? No.

MY DEFINITION

When I think about empathy in my life, I like to go back to my pre-school years, when learning about people was my favourite thing. Obviously, I was doing it subconsciously. It was more about being sorry for someone rather than putting myself in someone's shoes and looking from another perspective. When a child was crying, I would give them a toy, if they didn't want to play, I'd remove myself to a different corner of the room. When I didn't understand what others wanted, I'd ask my mum. This is what it looked like. Through compassion and experiencing my own emotions, I would learn other people's perspectives. However, empathy is not equal to compassion or co-experiencing other people's emotions. Empathy involves putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, which in turn enables us to understand and look from a perspective different than our own.

There are two types of empathy: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy. In this book, I'd like to focus on cognitive empathy, although the emotional one is also important for leaders.

EGOCENTRISM

Now that you know what empathy is, it is time to look at the complete opposite – egocentrism. Are you wondering why a software engineer needs a book about psychological terms? Well, this is so that you are aware of the fact, that your superpowers can have their dark side counterparts. Another reason is – knowing your enemy. You must have met loads of

self-centred people in your life and it helps to know what you're up against. Or what is not worth the fight. As I mentioned earlier, empathy is a skill enabling you to look at some phenomena, projects, people, etc., from a perspective different from your own. Egocentrism on the other hand is putting yourself in the very middle of the solar system, and being unable to understand somebody else's point of view.

What is more, experiencing egocentrism entrails... your childhood.

How many times did you call your parents from another room to say: "Look what I've built!". Your mum would call back: "Yes, I can see." – and? Obviously, I thought that she did see. Seriously, how on earth would she be able to do that? (Just so we're clear, my Mum might be a superwoman in her own right, but she doesn't have laser eyes and cannot see through walls.)

In my child's brain, I was convinced that other people think and see the world the way I see it. It is quite natural. That's why mum knows and sees everything. I didn't have empathy back then. When I was doing my research for this chapter, I read a lot about children's behaviour in the egocentric period of development. To my surprise, pulling spider's legs to check how many they essentially need to walk is also... a strong



Sympathy drives disconnection and egocentric behaviours

manifestation of egocentrism. A child does not try to imagine what would happen if a huge ogre tried to pull my legs off just to see how they can cope without them. I feel deeply ashamed of myself now for hurting poor spiders and other innocent insects, without batting an eyelid.

What's worse, I spent weeks trying to figure out why Rowen Atkinson's wife (Mr Bean) doesn't find him funny.

But now I know why children do it and I have lots of empathy in me today and I'm trying to understand what was wrong with me. Turns out – absolutely nothing at all. It's just what kids are like. Beyond the age of 7, the way we think becomes decentralised. The intensity of this process obviously differs from one person to another, but such is the general tendency.

What about the grown-ups? Let's assume that all your co-workers are over the magical age of 7 and that the process of their thinking decentralisation has already begun. It will be tough if it has already finished too. How do you tell if a software engineer is egocentric? They do the job for the sake of it, which to an extent makes sense; they will be good at coding and... that's it. When given an assignment, they will complete it, perhaps even with no errors, but they will not understand why they had to do it. You may say – there's no need for them to know the purpose, just let them do their job. Perhaps this is your approach too? Admit it, how many times did you just complete a task without giving it much thought?

It happens to the best of us. Sometimes there is no point to wonder about the purpose of the task. But usually, there is a point to it. This is where empathy comes in on a white knight. I mean, a horse!

Another example. You and your co-worker establish something and then it turns out that things are different from what has been agreed upon. They “forgot” to tell you about changes

and went on and did things differently from what had been established. Or complained that “this isn’t what we agreed on” when, as a matter of fact, nothing had been planned at all.

I mean common sense, logic... Self-centred people are convinced that you possess the superpowers of looking into their minds. They think that you must know, like mum seeing things through the wall. When it’s not the case at all. Thanks to your empathy you are aware of the fact, that this is the way this person perceives reality. So, you make notes, you remind them, you babysit them and walk on eggshells. It only works... until it doesn’t. Boundaries! You will read about them further on in the book. Until empathy fluff makes friends with boundaries fluff, she’s screwed.

CAN YOU LEARN EMPATHY?

What is it like with children? Everyone remembers the type of moments I described in the previous chapter from their own childhood. We can even assume, that we’re all beyond 7 years old, so we all have empathy now? Feature – like? Surely, most of us do have it, though our levels of empathy differ from person to person. Yes, you do have empathy. What is your level of empathy? You must be wondering what levels there are to choose from; beginner and expert, or anything else in between? Everybody has got their own measure and your empathy is tailor-made. When you grow, it grows with you.

HOW TO GROW IT?

I always thought you need to practise it. But how do you practise empathy? Do you ask people how they feel, when they are in a car crash? This may not be the best idea. But there are situations when you should ask. Especially yourself. Because the only way to get to grow your empathy is to get to know yourself. The more self-aware we are, the bigger our empathy, because we can relate. Moving on – how do you get to know yourself? It might be worth looking into a particular situation, person, problem and ask, for example:

- ➔ how do I feel about it?
- ➔ how do I see it?
- ➔ how would a person from the outside world feel?
- ➔ how could a person from the outside world see it?
- ➔ what are that person's reasons?
- ➔ what might be affecting this particular situation/person?

By answering these questions, we practise perspective and we also get to know ourselves through self-reflection, which is crucial here.

CHOICE

Empathy is a choice, a sensible choice. It requires accounting for a different point of view, sensitivity and emotional intelligence. Thanks to empathy I can connect in a particular situation with the part of me that is familiar with this type of situation and can recognise these feelings, see the world from a different view. This isn't easy and it takes practice.

EMPATHY AND A SOFTWARE ENGINEER

When creating systems, that keep evolving, do we have to be like fortune-tellers and “predict” the future? Or should we put interfaces EVERYWHERE possible, because it’s more SOLID this way? Or maybe it would be worth using empathy? Empathy is one of software developers’ most important tools.

EMPATHY HELPS TO ESTIMATE

Do you also struggle with estimating your projects and tasks? Let’s face it, all software engineers have this problem. How do you define estimation? What are the purposes of it? Timing, budget and good results, but HOW? Estimation requires predicting not only the number of man-hours, tasks, results, etc. but also team dynamics and other human factors. Knowing your own potential and the potential of other team members will help estimate with greater accuracy, instead of assuming, that every team is capable of completing a task within the same frame of time.

BIKESHEDDING

Imagine a group of people gathering to plan out, build and introduce... a nuclear power plant. Top-quality experts debate about technology, safety matters and commercial viability. All of a sudden someone suggests building a bike shed next to the factory. No doubt, it’s a good idea for commuting workers. However, instead of deciding on the technologies of obtaining nuclear energy from the atom, the team is spending a significant amount of time choosing the colour for the bike

shed roof. Everybody feels the need to contribute to the decision whether the roof should be transparent, red or blue and they won't back down. Does it make sense? No, it doesn't. Very often in this kind of discussion, it takes a lot of empathy and courage to stand up and say: "This is counterproductive. We need to move on!"

Now imagine that you are a top-quality specialist in your company. Your salary is probably much higher than that of your colleagues. Every decision you make is important – and sometimes it affects the months of your team's work to follow. When it comes to discussing details... everything and everyone seem to be against your vision. You waste your time and energy on trivial details. You should know that as a software engineer you should be focusing on something more than just coding. You have to meet the requirements of the business, not those of the art of coding. You have to learn to see the triviality of some aspects and agnostically concentrate on the solutions to the problem. Empathy comes in handy here. Solving algorithmic tasks is a good exercise. And not in a particular programming language, but in a very general way, for example using pseudocode. It invites you to use your imagination, which always goes hand in hand with empathy. Why waste time and energy on implementing things that will never be used by another class/model? Just for the sake of it?

EMPATHY AND BUSINESS

It is common knowledge that empathy is one of the critical leader skills and that it brings enormous benefits to business management and creating.

If a leader wants to have a more committed, sensitive and innovative team, they must be equipped with empathy, otherwise, their visions will be unrealistic and unreasonable. Team members are usually engaged not only in a project but also in the organisation as a whole. We hardly ever leave jobs due to technical problems or equipment failures (I have mainly software engineers in mind here), we quit because of weak management, or the manager himself (herself), who simply doesn't understand us. And it's not even about being unable to resonate with that person, but about their inability to put themselves in our position. Therefore, empathy helps prevent high staff rotation rates. Some may say that staff rotation is a natural trend, however, we mustn't forget that it causes gaps in the domain knowledge, especially in product engineering (not enough Greenfield products).

REMOTE EMPATHY

And how do we express empathy remotely? What level of communication can be achieved online? Needless to say, when working remotely we have far fewer empathy-friendly factors at our disposal:

- ➔ fewer stimulants
- ➔ fewer communication channels
- ➔ no body language to observe
- ➔ limited cooperation between team members, concentration on individual goals rather than whole team goals

How can remote empathy be supported? By asking questions, more questions than usual, with precisising obscure emotions and feelings on top of the obvious reactions.

EMPATHY AND FEEDBACK

Giving feedback is a very important issue in any type of business. We will discuss it further later on in the book, but I'd like to mention it in this chapter because giving feedback without empathy is simply not going to work. So, ask, be specific and take into account the actual realistic perspective of the person you are dealing with.

YOU'RE PROBABLY DOOMED

I don't know if you're aware of the *curse of knowledge* (but don't tell your children about it or they'll stop going to school!). On the one hand it's a cool curse 🧐, however, as my Mum rightly used to say "You were a fresher once." Every new experience makes us prouder of ourselves, it is especially true in the field of technology, and we tend to easily forget about what it was like when we didn't possess all this omniscience. But there is a cure to this "amnesia" – it's empathy.

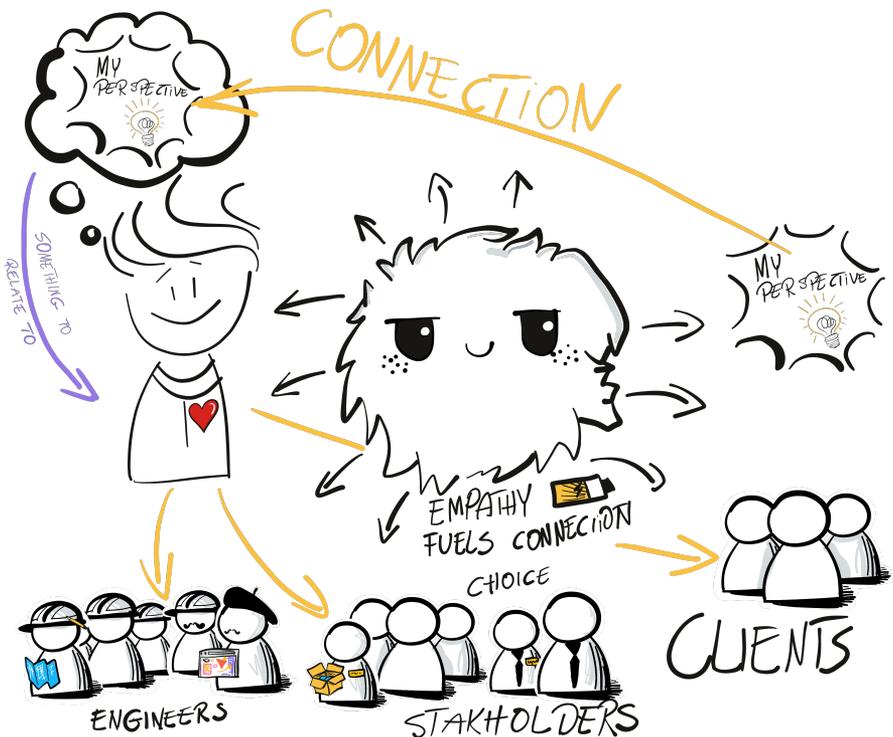
It may be difficult for a senior to remember, that a junior won't necessarily know that a kinetic pulse generator with a wooden handle means as much as a hammer. Similarly, you wouldn't say to a child: "Pray thee, my peerless paramour, I cry your mercy but I need to couch a hogshead.." Exactly. Empathy will take you to the same place, where the person you're dealing with is at the moment; you may have been there yourself in the past, or perhaps you have enough imagination to visualise this place. Empathy will help. The empathy fluff will remind you of your own self from the past.

EMPATHY IS YOUR TOOL

Thanks to empathy you will start finding solutions instead of creating more problems.

You'd think it's a natural talent. But we learn it as we become more mature. Children hardly have it. You could say the same about walking; anyone can run, but in order to run safely you should train properly, maybe even learn some theory. What knowledge have you got about empathy? Did you ever use it consciously? If the answer is no – it's time to start. I will be referring to empathy in your actions, thinking and feeling further in the book.

So, start practising – run!





Fot. Dawid Pośliński

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a software developer, but I also like to write, draw and educate which makes me potentially the weirdest combination of personalities, as well as soft and hard skills in today's fintech world. I've been part of the fintech world since the end of 2010. I'm the author of all the illustrations, because I like reading picture books myself. I wanted my drawings to make the book interesting and cool. Whether I have achieved this goal is for you to decide.

Thank you and hopefully see you at some conferences!

