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LEADERSHIP



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LEADERSHIP ESSENTIALS:

Empathy

BY VALERIE M. GRUBB

"Leadership is about empathy. It is about having the ability to relate to and connect with people for the purpose of inspiring and empowering their lives."

— Oprah Winfrey



Let's start with a definition. Empathy is...

...the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

In general, being empathic boils down to building positive connections with others by seeing and understanding things from their point of view.

But being empathic as a leader involves even more because of workplace responsibilities and the power dynamics involved in leader-employee relationships. A leader's actions can have a trickle-down effect throughout an entire organization—and that's why it's critical for leaders to actively cultivate this trait in themselves. In fact, by some counts it's "the most important leadership skill" out there. No surprise, then, that it's in high demand these days for leadership and management roles!

It is very important to note though that having empathy does not mean letting things slide! Too often, managers and people leaders wrongly think that if they show empathy, they are not holding their employees to task. That's not the case at all.

In fact, by showing empathy, leaders can actually strengthen accountability.

Empathy is one route to giving employees the support and encouragement that can help them rise to their challenges and exceed your expectations (and their own!).

THE VALUE OF EMPATHY IN THE WORKPLACE

Empathy is the starting point for creating a community and taking action. It's the impetus for creating change.

— Max Carver

As an element of emotional intelligence, empathy plays an important role in building the positive interpersonal connections that are key to a healthy, productive work environment. Those improved relationships can yield multiple benefits to an organization.

For example, Microsoft found that by building trust and improving communication, "empathy leads to understanding and collaboration, which helps innovation push its way through the often-messy journey toward helpful products." At Microsoft, an emphasis on empathy helped teams develop AI-based projects to help people with disabilities.

An empathic approach can also help organizations improve hiring and retention. One study found that

"senior leader empathy is linked to reduced intent to leave." People want to feel like more than cogs in a machine, and to be valued as individuals who have feelings, triumphs, and challenges. They are especially responsive to leaders who prioritize and support work-life balance and "understand that their employees (like themselves) have both a duty at home and with family and all the pressures which come with that, as well as having to maintain their professional responsibilities." Employees want to work for leaders (and with colleagues) who care. Unsurprisingly, companies whose leadership and HR policies are marked by an empathic approach very frequently rank highly on "best places to work" lists.

Empathy also can give leaders an edge over their competitors.

Looking at the market from the point of view of other companies can help leaders pinpoint their competitors' strengths and weaknesses, as well as possibly anticipate their next moves—and outflank them.

Honestly, I can't imagine a single reason why a leader wouldn't want to foster empathy in the workplace. In short, "an empathic environment can increase understanding among coworkers, quality engagement and leadership efficacy, and can improve relationships with clients and stakeholders."



HOW TO BE A MORE EMPATHIC LEADER

You can only understand people if you feel them in yourself.

— John Steinbeck

With effort, deliberateness, and persistence, anyone can become a more empathic person. You don't have to be born with "empathy genes" or go to "empathy school." You just need to commit to developing this skill in yourself and keep in mind some general guidelines.

Take your time. Connections with people don't develop overnight. As Carla Hasson, the global chief brand officer of Citi, points out, "It requires time to get to know who people are and it requires patience to take yourself outside of who you are and what you're comfortable with." You need to recognize that.

Show interest in other people. Ask your employees questions and listen attentively to their answers. Learn about their roles in the organization and about the work they do. And learn about their personal lives, too—hobbies, interests, families, goals, etc. (Just be sure not to pry inappropriately or fail to respect their boundaries.)

Be sincere. Don't just go through the motions. You can't build genuine connections with your employees if you're just pretending to care about them. You have to mean it.

Be willing to help employees with their problems. In addition to altruistic reasons for doing this, there are pragmatic reasons as well: one person's problems can affect their entire team or department, or even the entire organization. Helping employees resolve their problems (whether professional or personal) enables them to focus their attention and energy on their work and achieve better results.

Be compassionate. Pay attention to your employees' workloads. If someone seems like they're approaching burnout, take action to lighten their loads. And when employees are dealing with unexpected or new challenges (such as a life change or a personal loss), give them the support and space they need to manage them.

When I was with Oxygen Media, my employee's wife gave birth to twins. It was a wonderful moment although the ensuing weeks and even months were a nightmare for Anthony due to a severe lack of sleep. It was almost comical as he would come to work in the same clothes he had on the day before (and once, he came in with barf on his shirt and didn't even realize it!). He was an A player up to this point although his performance took a nosedive. Rather than punish him for it, I lightened the load so he could focus on one thing at a time. Once his babies were in a more regular sleep pattern, he was back up to stellar performance mode and his loyalty to me (and the company) for working with him during this challenging time was off the charts. Showing a little bit of empathy resulted in a great, loyal, long-term employee.

Be accessible. It's hard to build relationships with employees if they don't have opportunities to connect with you. Remember the power imbalance in the manager–employee relationship and try to be sensitive to your employees' perspectives. Do you make yourself readily available for meetings and one-on-one conversations? Why might someone be reluctant to approach you? In order to achieve the best communication possible, you want your employees to feel comfortable sharing with you.

Work at it. Empathy doesn't develop overnight. It's a skill that needs to be developed—and maintained. So practice it regularly, mindfully, and with an open mind and an open heart.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy.

— Meryl Streep

We've all struggled over the past year and a half. Employers' responses to the pandemic have highlighted companies' strengths (and deficiencies) in their ability to treat their employees empathically. Many organizations adopted more empathy-based practices to help their people manage the stress, radically altered working conditions (e.g., abruptly and unexpectedly shifting to remote work, having to juggle work with helping their children with remote learning), and general uncertainty and fear associated with the pandemic.

These efforts paid off: employees who had empathic leaders and managers felt "much more able to balance work obligations with family and personal obligations" during the pandemic. Although we don't yet know exactly what the post-pandemic business landscape will look like, I agree with one study that "employers' pandemic response has changed employee expectations," and I suspect we'll see the emphasis on empathy continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the many benefits of empathic leadership. But it shouldn't take a global crisis to make people recognize the value of empathy.

As the saying goes, "The best leaders are those that lead by example." So it follows that if you want employees who care about and connect well with others, then you need to exhibit those behaviors yourself. Empathy can provide a solid foundation for a workplace environment that's more positive, more collaborative, more innovative—and more productive and more effective, too. ■

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