

A Guide to Empathetic Leadership



E-Book

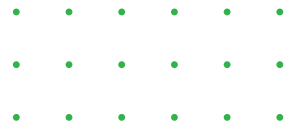
Often overlooked as a “soft skill”, empathy has become a compulsory characteristic for effective leaders. With the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic over the last couple of years, empathy has become a necessity to maintain staff productivity. Employees are facing higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression with increased post-pandemic unpredictability. As a result, empathy has evolved into one of the most valued qualities that a leader can possess but is often overlooked. Put simply, an empathetic leadership style brings out the best in employees which, in turn, plays a vital role in leveraging the success of a company.

What is Empathy?

Empathy is defined as the capacity to understand what other people are feeling without them having to say anything. In other words, it is to put oneself in another’s position to understand their feelings and behavior. To apply empathy in the workplace is the ability to understand things from the colleague’s perspective, give them due respect, and value their opinions.

An empathetic leader is described as one who takes a genuine interest in their employees’ lives, their challenges, and their feelings. They make a conscious effort to understand their situations and their struggles to support and help, leaving them feeling safe and cared for while building a connection based on trust.





The difference between empathy and sympathy

Sympathy is acknowledging the other person's situation, but not considering it from their point of view, or considering how to help them. A sympathetic response to quicksand is telling the person that they will be saved, rather than leaping into the quicksand and getting

Empathy is being able to relate to the person's feelings and thinking about what could be helpful for them in their position. For the person outside quicksand, this means thinking this means thinking about how to carefully pull them out while keeping oneself safe

Consequences of a company that is not empathetic

Companies that lack empathy stand out in the industry. Empathy within a company is viewed by both employees and clientele, making its absence obvious when interacting with the organization.

The consequences of a company that lacks empathy are as follows:

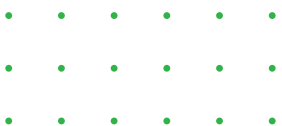
- 1 Decline in the well-being of employees**

Mental health and well-being play an important role in an employee's overall productivity & performance. A company that lacks empathy does not feel like one that an individual can rely on for security & care. This leads to workers feeling overwhelmed, stressed and prone to burnout.
- 2 Selfishness within the organization**

If employees are not taken care of, they are more likely to feel unsafe in the workplace. This leads employees to go into "survival mode" which means doing anything to protect themselves against danger. In doing so, others' needs are also neglected, causing rivalry between employees & translating into unempathetic interaction with clients.
- 3 Low levels of productivity and quality of work**

It is common knowledge that people are more productive when they are motivated and satisfied with their work environments. Unhappy employees who hate the workplace reflect on the quality of their work and their performance.
- 4 Hinders the progress of the company**

The effect of the consequences mentioned leaves a company that has an image of being hostile, unreliable, & incompetent. Experienced by both employees and clients, this prevents the company from reaching its full potential.



Attributes of good leadership



Being able to be approached without hesitation

Leadership does not always have to imply hierarchy, an intimidating concept when it comes to having to approach an individual at a higher level. A person who interacts with other human beings and helps them contributes more to the definition of a leader, being more related to being someone that the team can look to for guidance and help.

Showing genuine interest in the needs of employees

Taking the time to listen to employees & evaluate the conversation, helping them to fulfill their needs aids in creating a dynamic for them that works well within the team. Taking an interest in their lives, thoughts & feelings also makes them feel taken care of & strengthens resilience.

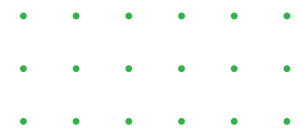
The willingness to accommodate thoughts & opinions

Include the whole team in the evaluation of how the team is doing, sharing their opinions, giving feedback, and brainstorming ideas for how to improve or overcome challenges together. If a team member comes up with an innovative idea that could be beneficial and chooses to communicate it, an empathetic leader will listen and validate this idea and take it on board if it seems feasible.

The ability to motivate and empower

A leader who encourages others to feel like they have a voice in the team will result in an empowered group that speaks up, will be innovative, willing to participate and take on new challenges. It will also create a sense of trust and belief which will empower them further.





The different types of empathy and the roles they play in the workplace

A child's ability to empathize with others grows between the ages of 3 & 5. Listening skills, responding to others' feelings, understanding of different feelings, & friendships develop. This can be positively or negatively impacted by various events in the person's life as they grow older.

However, in the workplace, with the pressure to succeed as an individual in a competitive environment, empathy can be impacted negatively for employees in any department. A lack of empathy in HR managers can have a number of consequences that can affect productivity and employee turnover in an organization. With the recent development of generational cohorts such as Gen Z, the majority of younger employees do not hesitate to be vocal about their needs and will not tolerate a workplace that is not accepting or turn a blind eye. The others will hesitate to voice their opinions in fear of causing friction with other employees & managers and instead will endure the discomfort, which greatly impacts productivity levels.

There are three main types of empathy:

Cognitive empathy

Cognitive empathy is defined as knowing how the other person feels and what their thoughts might be. Sometimes called "perspective taking", it is concerned with thought, understanding and intellect. This helps in negotiations, motivating other people, and understanding diverse viewpoints and is ideal for virtual meetings. It is known as comprehending on an intellectual level. Understanding emotion is not the same as feeling that emotion.

Emotional empathy

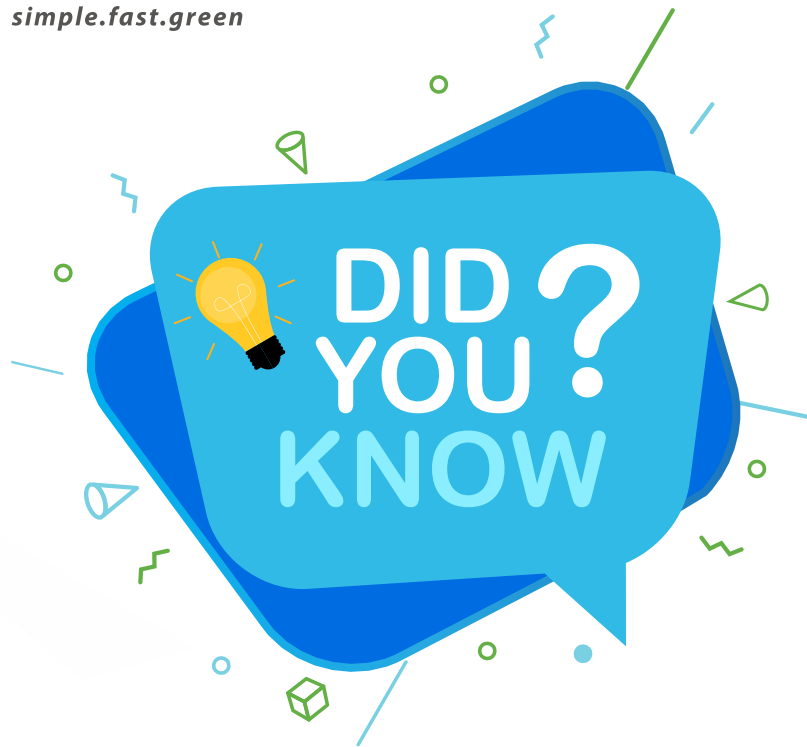
Emotional empathy involves feeling physically along with others, almost as if their emotions were contagious. It is concerned with feelings, physical sensation and mirroring neurons in the brain. It helps build close interpersonal relationships and is useful in careers like coaching, marketing, management and HR. However, it can be overwhelming or inappropriate in certain circumstances. The term "empath" defines a person with the ability to fully take on the emotional and mental state of others. When people lack the ability to manage their own emotions, it can lead to psychological exhaustion that leads to burnout.

Compassionate empathy

Compassionate empathy helps one understand a person's troubles and feel with them while spontaneously feeling the urge to help. It involves intellect, emotion and action, considering the whole person.

Compassionate empathy is ideal, while cognitive empathy is fitting for the workplace and monetary negotiations. Emotional empathy is the first response with loved ones. Compassionate empathy is the right balance of both. Compassionate empathy honors the natural connection by considering both felt senses & the intellectual situation of another, without losing one's center.





According to Greater Good Magazine:

Women score higher in empathy quizzes (especially affective empathy)

Women are said to take the quizzes more often and have higher empathy scores than their male counterparts. This could reflect gender-based norms or sex-based differences in willingness to give statements about personal experiences. However, the data can neither confirm, nor dismiss the interpretations. Women's affective empathy scores were also notably higher.

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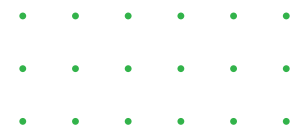
Empathy is likely to increase with age

There are studies that claim that younger generations are less empathetic, as a result of a rise in narcissism amongst young adults, the increased use of technology & media influence, shrinking family sizes, (dealing with siblings also enhances empathetic feelings) & increased pressure to succeed academically & professionally. There is also a possibility that empathy simply increases with age. On the contrary, decreased social engagement & physical & mental health difficulties can also hurt empathy.

According to Greater Good Magazine:

Middle siblings are likely to be more empathetic than only children

Greater Good Magazine reports that empathy quiz scores for middle children were greater than those for older or younger siblings. Empathy scores for only children who have fewer opportunities to practice negotiating with siblings were the lowest.



10 ways to develop empathetic leadership skills

1. Increase self-awareness

A useful exercise for leaders is to think of the people in their lives to whom they feel empathy towards (parents, children, etc.) and “borrow” those feelings to create stronger interpersonal relationships with those at work. Encouraging collaborative conversations, rewarding transactional relationships and including coaches who can support the process without being personally involved can create cultures that encourage empathy.

2. Avoid judgment

Avoid the need to pass judgment, even if the feelings of the other is in opposition to one’s own. Empathetic leaders don’t judge. Instead, they let go of biases and are open to new perspectives. Avoid looking at the feelings of others in terms of agreement or disagreement, but instead, take their feelings into account & use the opportunity to peer into their perceptions and views. This will help to understand their experiences better. As a leader, it is easy to get caught up in believing that one’s own perspective is reality, forgetting the circumstances that people find themselves in as a result. This circles back to their point of increasing self-awareness.

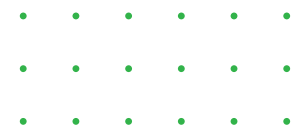
3. Avoid distraction and be fully present when listening

Glancing at watches or phones or scanning the room while someone is speaking can be quite discouraging. When someone is speaking, listen. If they’re expressing their feelings, be there with them. Put yourself in their position and think of ways you can be supportive. Focusing on others and demonstrating empathy can be a challenge for some leaders, especially when distracted by technology or multitasking. Avoiding all distractions will allow a leader to understand and connect with employees in a more powerful way.

4. Observe body language and encourage the quiet ones

Non-verbal communication is often underestimated and can say more about one’s thoughts than any other words. Body language is the most direct way that people communicate what they think or feel. Being aware of one’s own body language, remaining open and listening, and leaning in when people speak helps to show that you are interested in what they are saying. Spending time considering how one comes across when communicating with others can help develop empathetic skills.

In any situation, there are always two to three who do most of the talking. The quiet ones who never speak up, even if their ideas are concrete. Encourage what people have to say. This simple act will empower everyone else as well.



5.

Be curious - take a personal interest in the employees

Cultivate a genuine curiosity in the lives of those who work for an organization. Show interest by asking questions about their lives, challenges, families and aspirations. A personal interest is what builds a relationship, as opposed to a professional one. Employees approach a leader who lacks empathy with their guard up and feeling as if they are alone in looking after their own interests. When everyone knows that they can be open about their thoughts and feelings without being judged, dismissed or ignored, it contributes to a more pleasant work environment.

6.

Be willing to help

Empathy does not end at listening. Be willing to help while remaining behind professional boundaries. A simple act of kindness can go a long way. Empathetic leaders don't just listen but truly listen, which means listening with open ears, open eyes and an open heart.

7.

Schedule one-on-one meetings

Uninterrupted time to discuss projects, review performance, and remove blocks are sacred in making employees more comfortable and at ease to discuss problems. It also provides an opportunity to get to know them on a more personal level and build lasting relationships. The majority of employees prefer to discuss their issues in private. Employees with a good relationship with their manager might also be more forthcoming about issues in their personal lives that might be affecting performance, which when properly addressed, can improve employee loyalty and engagement.

8.

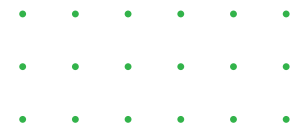
Be observant of work burnout

Intuition can be an important skill when it comes to being a leader. Being able to evaluate the state of the team can help identify and address where anyone is falling behind. This enables each team member to bring the best version of themselves to the team. When red flags make themselves evident, bring it to the table, discuss them and find a solution.

9.

Understand and consider while drawing boundaries

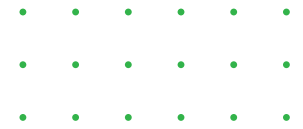
Mental health is severely underestimated when it comes to being a leader. Take note of how mental state affects interaction with teams, perceptions at work and the way problems are managed. If a leader cannot take care of themselves, they will struggle to show up for others. Practices that boost a healthy mind are exercise, socializing with family and friends, adequate sleep and a healthy diet. If left ignored, it is possible to develop empathy and compassion fatigue.



10. Practice emotional intelligence and show vulnerability

Showing vulnerability develops empathy for people, and companies are no different. When companies own up to their challenges and problems, this demonstrates that they are really trying. Not only does this build empathy, but if plans are not successful, even customers are more prepared to accept failure.





1. A sense of purpose and belonging

When efforts are appreciated by a company, employees feel a part of a group that is working as a team to achieve the same goals which in turn, benefits themselves.

2. Cultivation of a motivated and empowered atmosphere

Employees often have a connection with each other that goes beyond the workplace. Relationships where they feel like they can depend on each other, lean on each other for support and uplift each other to become the best version of themselves leads to a motivated and empowered atmosphere in the workplace.

3. Happy, healthy employees

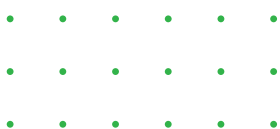
Better mental health and decreased stress levels lead to a higher work quality and increased productivity.

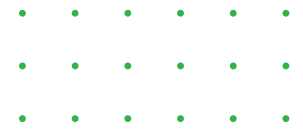
4. A feeling of trust and care

A relaxed atmosphere in the workplace and the knowledge of the company supporting them contributes to a sense of ease that enables workers to focus more on their duties instead of watching out for themselves.

5. Higher levels of productivity and better outcome as a company

A safe, trusting and supportive atmosphere contributes towards happier, highly productive employees which in turn, leads to the success of an organization. By working from the inside out, starting off as an empathetic leader, followed by an empathetic team influences work and achievements which greatly benefits the company.





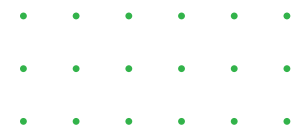
The do's & don'ts of communicating with employees

Don'ts

- Focus on weaknesses - While it is important to point out where employees are falling behind, regular discussions of the topic can lead employees to feel as though they simply cannot do right in the managers eyes, leading to job disengagement. Instead, talk about strengths & place employees in positions where their natural talents shine.
- Disregard professional developments - It is easy to focus all communication with employees on their current job roles. Employees may feel as though their aspirations are disregarded. To avoid this, regularly communicate information about career growth, mentorship & learning opportunities. This can increase employee engagement and reduce turnover.
- Be unapproachable - Hesitation to talk to managers can lead to mistakes with low engagement and high conflict. This leads to the manager having to step in to do damage control which makes busy managers even more unavailable. Have an open door policy, schedule regular meetings and encourage employees to communicate when they are facing issues.
- Micromanage - This phenomenon demoralizes employees by questioning all of their decisions, over scrutinizing work and demanding detailed summaries of completed tasks. Leadership courses may be helpful if job insecurity on the part of the manager is the problem. If employees are prone to mistakes, simply allowing them to make mistakes and face the consequences may be necessary.
- Be pessimistic - This can damage employee morale even further. When employees raise complaints, focus on brainstorming solutions rather than commiserating. They will appreciate the effort & be motivated to take the same approach when a similar problem arises once again.
- Passive-aggressive communication - Hiding feedback in humour, providing conflicting direction and placing blame on employees leaves them confused and disengaged. This is the result of managers who lack skill in providing criticism or feedback. Consider emotional intelligence training. Understanding how to communicate feedback makes processes smoother.

Do's

- Meet once a week - Informal internal discussions where challenges can be solved and managers are updated on ongoing projects aids communication.
- Regular 1-on-1s - Putting a more personal touch on group discussions allows opportunity for direct, honest communication. It is important to keep these quick and informal to really connect with the employee.
- Be open with the team - This builds trust and cultivates a shared cause or purpose. Being in a position of authority does not mean one has to be intimidating. Open communication goes a long way in building a healthy work environment.
- Ask for and give feedback - This gives employees a clear indication of how they are performing in their roles. Positive or negative feedback lets everyone know where they stand and where there is room for improvement.



How to cultivate empathy in the workplace

Being empathetic is made up of a few factors:

- Listening
- Tuning into the feelings of others
- Responding appropriately with verbal and nonverbal communication
- Using empathetic language
- Being patient

Exercises

Listening sessions

One of the most significant skills related to empathy is active listening. Active listening is all about building rapport and trust by demonstrating that one is paying attention. Try teaming employees up in pairs and have them role-play a customer service scenario that calls for empathy. Restating and summarizing, encouragement prompts validating points of view and using appropriate body language are all exercised in this practice.

Negotiation

Although understanding someone else's point of view is important, unreasonable requests may also be an issue. Handling the situation in a professional and caring manner will avoid any conversation about the "horrible" experience that one may have had with the company. Once again, pairing up team members to role play will prove successful.

Practicing empathetic language

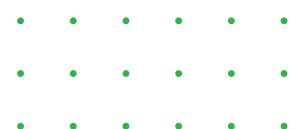
Keywords and phrases demonstrate listening and the desire to help. Some of the following language can prove helpful in this practice.

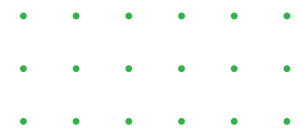
Empathetic questions

The use of open-ended questions can help support active listening, displaying care & interest.

Leading questions

These are effective when wanting to find out more about a subject. One example is, "What happened then?"





Words of urgency

Incorporating words of urgency can convey that an employee's complaint is important. This demonstrates the need to help resolve their problem quickly and efficiently.

Here are some examples conveying urgency and a sense of action:

- "I appreciate you bringing this to our attention; we will deal with it immediately."
- "I can see where the problem is..."
- "What I'm currently doing to help is..."
- "This should be fixed by the end of the day."

Committed closes

Making a commitment at the end of a conversation can help leave a final impression that their experience and feelings are valid. Here are four examples:

- "I'll contact you as soon as we have an update."
- "I will be in touch shortly."
- "Please let me know if you have any further questions."
- "Feel free to reach out if you need anything else."

Empathy is a trait that is overlooked as one that is not important in a leader. Some may even say that it can make a leader seem weak or compliant. However, empathy is one of the most valuable traits that a leader can have to make themselves and the company stand out in a highly competitive industry.



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