

Leading With Empathy

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Sarah and Mo both worked for a small tech startup that was constantly launching new products and innovating on existing ones. Mo was new to the development team and struggling to adjust. Hired for his brilliant coding skills, the rapid pace and endless meetings overwhelmed him, and his performance had started to dip.

Recognising the shift, Mo's manager, Sarah, asked if the two could take a walk to grab a tea. After sitting down at the cafe, Sarah started by asking Mo if everything was okay with him.

Instead of pointing out the errors in his recent projects, she started by asking about his well-being and truly listening to his concerns. Sarah had been a developer before, and she got it – so she let Mo know she had time to listen, genuinely wanted to hear how things felt from his perspective, and would do everything she could to support him and the rest of the team.

This empathetic approach allowed Mo to open up about the challenges he was facing. Sarah, in turn, learned a lot about what her team was going through – she had no idea that people were feeling this way because no one had told her.

She adjusted some team processes and provided the developers with additional support. With the understanding and adjustments, Mo not only bounced back but exceeded expectations, launching an app feature that became a major hit. Sarah's leadership, rooted in empathy, didn't just help Mo with his immediate struggles; it empowered him to thrive in his role.

Hello, and welcome to today's lesson on Leading with Empathy. Together, we'll examine how to engage your staff to better navigate their thoughts, emotions and needs and enable everyone to perform at their best.

Leading with empathy is more than just understanding someone's feelings; it's also embodying, demonstrating, and acting upon that understanding in a professional environment.

When leaders genuinely care about their team – not just about the tasks they do but also their feelings, challenges, and even bits from their personal lives – they're building more than just a workforce. They're building strong relationships. Leading with empathy means creating real connections, understanding what each person needs, and establishing deep trust. This isn't solely about hitting business goals; it's about standing beside your team and motivating them, especially during challenging times. Because a leader who nurtures these relationships doesn't just drive results; they foster a committed and thriving team.

Let's explore what empathy means, why it's crucial for work and leadership, and provide you with some actionable tips to help you learn to lead more empathetically.

But first... what is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It's that bridge of connection, where you can place yourself in another person's shoes and genuinely 'feel' what they're going through. But it's important to note that empathy isn't merely feeling bad for someone – that's sympathy. Empathy is about actually understanding the other person's perspective and knowing how they feel.

So why is it so important to lead with empathy?

At the heart of any business, leaders have the critical role of setting the direction. They're the compass, defining the vision, goals, and strategy, making sure everyone knows where the ship is sailing. They ensure the entire team is aligned and moving forward cohesively, with a core responsibility being helping their team achieve business objectives.

But there's more to it than simply getting results or reaching the intended destination. Leaders are also responsible for the journey. This means fostering a positive work environment, supporting team growth, and ensuring resources are available. Leaders are the motivators, the problem-solvers, and often the peacekeepers, making sure everyone feels valued and heard.

Employees who feel valued are engaged, and engaged employees get results.

So, while leading with empathy may sound warm and fuzzy, it's actually also a sound business strategy that helps ignite joy in people's work while also guiding them to hit their goals.

Leading with empathy builds trust. Empathetic leadership creates an environment where employees feel understood and valued. This not only boosts morale but also cultivates trust, a fundamental building block in any successful professional relationship.

Leading with empathy builds collaboration. When team members feel that their leaders understand their challenges and perspectives, they're more likely to engage, share ideas, and work collaboratively.

Leading with empathy boosts productivity. When employees feel supported and understood, they're more motivated to give their best.

There are three different types of empathy:

There's cognitive empathy, which is mostly about perspective-taking. It's the ability to understand another person's thought process or to see things from their viewpoint.

There's emotional empathy, which involves feeling what someone else feels, mirroring their emotions, and sharing in their joy or pain.

And there's compassionate or behavioural empathy, which goes beyond understanding and feeling. Compassionate empathy is about being moved to help or take action based on the feelings and situations of others.

So what can you do, as a leader, to take stock of your own leadership style and focus on leading with empathy?

You can start with active listening [1]. Empathetic leaders genuinely listen without interrupting or planning their next words. They're present and make an effort to understand the nuances of what's being communicated. To develop that skill, start at home around the dinner table or when out with friends – practice being present in conversations, ask open-ended questions, and resist the urge to interrupt or judge.

Next, consider your communication style. Do you direct your employees, or do you empower them? Do you tell them what needs to get done, or do you tell them how to do it? Empathetic leaders maintain open channels of communication, making themselves available for discussions, feedback, and concerns.

Be thoughtful about the feedback you provide. According to a Gallup survey [2], “when employees strongly agree they received “meaningful feedback” in the past week, they are almost four times more likely than other employees to be engaged.”

Constructive criticism is vital, but 'how' that criticism is delivered can make a big difference. Empathetic leaders seek to understand the context behind any missed goals and provide feedback in a manner that's constructive, caring, and focused on growth.

Be sure to self-reflect. Dina Denham Smith, writing for HBR [3], explores the need for leaders to escape their echo chambers and seek out diverse perspectives. Regularly take a moment to look back on your actions, behaviours, and communication. Ask yourself, "Did I approach that situation with understanding?" Don't be afraid to seek feedback from your staff and your peers. There's nothing wrong with approaching an employee, peer, or mentor and asking if they felt you handled a situation properly and if they had any suggestions on ways you could have acted with more empathy.

Engage with people from different backgrounds, industries, and experiences. The more we expose ourselves to varying perspectives, the better we get at understanding them.

And finally, keep learning. There is a tonne of information about leading with empathy out there. Read books, attend workshops, or listen to podcasts that focus on empathy, emotional intelligence, and effective leadership. Additionally, an article [4] in the journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* unveiled that people who frequently read fiction have improved social cognition and are better at grasping others' emotions. So, a few pages of a novel each day could be beneficial to cultivating empathy.

Empathy is a transformative leadership skill. It's more than just a feel-good factor; it's a critical competency that fosters trust, drives productivity, and enhances collaboration. By understanding the different types of empathy, recognising its manifestation in leadership, and actively working to develop it, we can pave the way for a more inclusive, understanding, and successful professional environment.

As you go forth in your professional journey, remember leading with empathy isn't just about being kind; it's about understanding, connecting, and propelling you and your team towards greater success.

[1] The Art of Active Listening, The Harvard Business Review Guide (2022)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDMtx5ivKK0>

[2] How Effective Feedback Fuels Performance, Denise McLain And Bailey Nelson (2022)
<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/357764/fast-feedback-fuels-performance.aspx>

[3] How Leaders Can Escape Their Echo Chambers, Dina Denham Smith (2022)
<https://hbr.org/2022/07/how-leaders-can-escape-their-echo-chambers>

[4] Reading Fiction and Reading Minds: The Role of Simulation in the Default Network, Diana I. Tamir, Andrew B. Bricker, David Dodell-Feder, and Jason P. Mitchell (2016)
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4733342/>