Why Empathy Is Important in Leaders Right Now



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Right now, you need to practice social — not emotional -— distancing. Amid the ever-changing chaos, your team deserves an empathetic leader who deeply understands what individual people are going through. Making the right managerial and executive decisions are challenging enough during good times — and even harder amid a global pandemic.

Having lived and worked around the world, I cannot think of a more necessary time for empathy. The playing field has changed for the foreseeable future. Unless you adopt empathetic leadership principles quickly, you may find yourself the captain of a sinking ship filled with crew members suffering

from analysis paralysis and traumatic shock.

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The importance of empathy

You may already be familiar with the value of empathy in leadership, at least on a theoretical level. The *Wall Street Journal* notes that roughly one in five organizations provides soft-skill training opportunities for staff to learn the art of leading with empathy. If you've been through a similar workshop, you might not have realized how important that training was until now.

Difficult situations reveal why empathy is important in leadership, and crises like COVID-19 drive the lesson home. Teams led by people who possess high emotional intelligence tend to work hard and persevere through rough patches. They also develop deeper bonds of trust, which are essential when employment statuses seem all too fragile.

Right now, plenty of workers are dealing with tremendous fear. Those guided by empathetic leaders will likely have an easier time working through their stresses, while others operating under a "business as usual" manager may become disengaged and resentful. Make no mistake: Leaders will be judged by how they react during this historic moment. Of course, leading with empathy is not an innate ability. Even if you have a high emotional intelligence quotient, you may need a refresher course in empathy and leadership. Here are a few strategies to practice:

1. Become more personable and

accessible

To attune yourself to your team's feelings, you must get in touch with your own emotions and understand how to express them. Marc Benioff, the head of Salesforce, showed signs of empathy when he tweeted his eight-point plan for dealing with the coronavirus. Point seven asked every CEO to wait 90 days before resorting to layoffs. If you have to furlough personnel, be graceful and compassionate about it. Don't coldly layoff 95 percent of your employees via a video like Cirque du Soleil did at the start of the crisis, a decision that garnered negative attention.

Take time to recognize and express your emotions as well as help your team work through their fears. Add a daily reminder in your calendar or phone to stay grounded. That little "ping" will remind you to reflect every day on what you're feeling and what's going on. In time, you will be able to tune in emotionally without a physical reminder.

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2. Listen and respond honestly and optimistically (within reason)

The only way your team will be vulnerable with you during this difficult period is if you learn to listen without judgment. Leading with empathy often involves saying nothing at all and sometimes agreeing that you are sad, confused or angry, too. According to work published in *The Journal of Behavioral Science*, 70 percent of successful people say they feel like imposters from time to time. Imagine how refreshing it would be for your team members to hear that you also struggle and will not use their feelings against them.

One caveat: Don't allow yourself or your team to wallow too long in sessions focused on negative emotions. Instead, enable

honest discussions and then pivot the conversation toward positive solutions. However, be aware of the language you use when you want to refocus your team. For example, in English, we tend to use “I feel” when we really mean “I think.” If you say, “I feel like you all need to get back to work,” then you are telling your team what to do, not empathizing. Consider your words carefully after team members open up; you want them to feel heard, not ignored, when you gently move the conversation in an optimistic direction.

3. Become an emotion-seeking detective

Now is not the moment to assume you know everything bothering your team. Ask employees, “What keeps you up at night?” Their answers may surprise you. Seem a little touchy-feely? Maybe. But your team members will hear your words as an indicator of your interest. Salesforce’s report “The Impact of Equality and Values Driven Business” reveals that when leaders pay attention to their employees’ needs, the employees are 4.6 times more apt to produce stellar work.

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You may discover that getting to know team members on a deeper level helps you notice when they’re not on their A-games. If you see someone struggling, intervene before their work completely falls apart. Part of the importance of empathy in leadership is being able to provide emotional guidance and encouragement that will help everyone develop personally and professionally.

Uncertain times call for unparalleled leaders. Show your humanity with a heavy dose of empathetic leadership. Empathy will not only motivate your team through crisis, but it will help you deal with your own conflicted feelings, too.

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