Why This Female Founder Isn’t Afraid to Show Her Empathetic Side

Empathy is pigeonholed as a ‘soft skill,’ but in fact it’s crucial for motivating others.

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You might think that everyone understands that business leaders need to be empathetic, but in fact only 40 percent of leaders surveyed were proficient in this social skill, according to DDI research.

What’s more, Businessolver’s 2018 *State of Workplace Empathy* study revealed that 70 percent of women polled rated their managers as empathetic, compared with 85 percent of men also rating their managers that way.

I’m not surprised by these findings. Leadership positions in the business world are predominantly held by men, and men are still expected to hide their emotions. Not only that, but a wide swath of research shows that white, heterosexual men make up the demographic with the fewest friends. Members of this group also experience the least emotional support in the friendships they *do* have. All of this is hardly conducive to leading with empathy.

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Still, the gender gap doesn’t come from the predominance of male leaders alone. After all, we grow up taking classes in

economics and history, but we're rarely offered a course to study empathy or relationship-building. Worse, once we enter the workforce, empathy is typecast as a "soft skill," implying that it's warm, fuzzy, weak and unhelpful.

Yet just like negotiation, financial forecasting or programming, the ability to relate to others and put oneself in their shoes is a skill set developed through study and practice.

Lead with love.

Leadership is all about inspiring the execution of tasks by others. Empathy — making those others feel seen — can create the trust that rallies your team to a cause. Trusting relationships lay the foundation for leadership, and strong workplace relationships improve retention rates and loyalty, which in turn reduces losses and increases a company's bottom line.

This has proven true at my company Chewse, where many people on my team tell me they've been looking for empathetic leadership like ours their whole career. Our culture of love and belonging has attracted (and retained) incredible talent.

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All that's good but, while you may *feel* you're being empathetic,your actions may be undermining your good intentions. Fortunately, there are concrete steps you can take to develop your skills and put your empathy to work as a leader:

1. Stop winning; start listening.

When someone says something we don't like, it's all too easy to get defensive or distort the speaker's argument in order to

“win.” When we do that, nobody wins.

But when we stop trying to win and start listening with the intent to learn, the results can be staggering and fresh. Fashion designer Eileen Fisher is proof of this: Her philosophy of “leading through listening” has been integral to the success and longevity of her company.

To lead empathetically, then, listen to someone’s argument and reflect it back. And don’t simply restate the argument — make it stronger. Verbalizing the other person’s view lets the other person know she (or he) is being heard; and strengthening it ensures that you are debating an intelligent perspective.

You should also feel comfortable countering the other person’s inaccurate assumptions of your viewpoint as long as you are kind, constructive and not defensive.

As a recent study showed, attentive, empathetic and nonjudgmental listening positively shapes the emotions and attitudes of the people you lead. The more you listen to the people on your team, the better you will understand one another. That’s when you can truly begin collaborating to find solutions to problems or develop the best strategies for the business.

2. Be a coach, not an advisor.

The compulsion to give advice is often born out of empathy for someone else’s distress and a sincere desire to help. But it can also come from a place of arrogance: A recent study found that giving unsolicited advice makes the advice giver feel more powerful.

I know, for me, that I sometimes give advice because I want to help “speed through” someone’s problem. When you’re in a position of authority, however, such unsolicited advice

exacerbates the power imbalance and gets in the way of an authentic connection.

Unwelcome advice may also be one reason that women feel less empathy from managers than do than men in the workplace. There's ample evidence – both scientific and anecdotal – that women receive far more advice than men, whether they've asked for it or not.

Instead of automatically giving instruction, it's perfectly acceptable to directly ask whether someone *wants* your advice or just needs your listening ear. Leaders tend to perceive every conversation as a request to solve a problem, but that's not the case.

Simply taking the time to ask, "Do you want me to listen, or do you want me to solve?" makes conversations far less fraught. And if someone is actually asking you for guidance, consider asking questions that will help lead the listener to his or her own answers – rather than your offering a ready-made solution. This kind of coaching tends to yield longer-term results for your teammates anyway.

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3. Speak thoughtfully and compassionately.

What you say to your team members and how you say it are equally important. For example, use "feeling" words instead of "thinking" words. Relate to the other person by saying, "I feel concerned about the status update …" rather than jumping into "I think you should …" Your vulnerability builds rapport and gives the other person the freedom to be real with you in turn.

Your statements should also be specific. Identifying the state

of your experience – naming your emotions – is critical feedback. It allows for a personal experience and connection with the listener.

When someone shares a negative emotion with you, marriage therapist John Gottman says, that’s a “bid” for emotional connection. Your positive responses to these bids are what build relationships.

When someone expresses an emotion with me, I often respond to the bid by sharing about a time when I felt a similar emotion. For example, if someone tells me she’s afraid to fail, I tell her about my five fund-raising rounds and how I was deeply afraid to fail. That way, we make an authentic connection and can be real with each other.

Many leaders – men and women alike – have risen to positions of authority by being assertive, bold and highly competitive. But developing the complementary leadership skill of empathy is vital in building a high-performing team of fiercely loyal and talented people. Revealing your own humanity will build powerful respect and trust among your team.

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