Harvard Business Review

Emotional Intelligence

What We Get Wrong About Empathic Leadership

by Olga Valadon

October 17, 2023

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Summary.   Fifty-two percent of respondents to a survey said they found their company's efforts to be empathetic towards employees are dishonest. This suggests that while managers and leaders are trying, many of them may be going about it wrong. For first-time managers,... **more**

An employee approaches you, clearly distressed. They aren't going to meet today's project deadline because their child is ill, and caregiving has been tough on them. They might need an extra day. You want to show your support, so you say something like, "I feel you, and I'm so sorry to hear that." But you're not a parent and your employee knows that. How could you really understand how they feel? Although your intentions are good, there's a chance you could come across as inauthentic and, possibly, even patronizing.

You may have been on one (or both sides) of similar interactions at work. A recent survey of more than 1,000 employees in the U.S. found that 52% of respondents feel their company's efforts to be

empathetic towards employees are dishonest. This suggests that while managers and leaders are trying, many of them may be going about it wrong.

For first-time managers, who are new to overseeing people, this situation can be extra tricky. You want build trust with your team members and show compassion, but your direct reports are watching you carefully. Displaying empathy in a way that seems authentic — as opposed to dishonest or ingenuine — can be challenging. Being under scrutiny adds an extra layer of pressure.

So, how can you get it right?

To forge stronger and more genuine connections with your team, you first need to understand what lies at the root of the challenge.

What We Get Wrong About Empathy

Many people confuse sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is when you feel sorrow for what someone else is going through because you can relate to their experience personally. In those cases, saying, "I feel you," would be an appropriate response.

However, most of us today work in multigenerational and multicultural organizations where employees show up with different backgrounds, issues, and experiences. You can't possibly expect to personally relate to every circumstance that is brought to you.

That's why developing the ability to be genuinely empathetic is so important. Empathy is the ability to show compassion for another person without personally relating to them through firsthand experience. For a manager, it means you can put yourself in someone else's shoes to understand where they're coming from, share that you understand, and thoughtfully respond to their feelings, thoughts, and circumstances.

Empathy allows leaders to build meaningful connections and develop deep trust with every member of their team. It helps leaders navigate interpersonal relationships with compassion,

regardless of shared experience.

Learning how to show this kind of genuine care is key to creating psychologically safe spaces where every employee feels valued. Your actions and words can have a domino effect and lay the foundation of a team culture that fosters mutual respect, increasing employee productivity, innovation and job satisfaction.

Here's how to display empathy with your team members in a more authentic way.

Actively listen and be curious.

Displaying authentic empathy starts with how you take in the information someone is telling you and what you do with that information. When a team member is vulnerable with you, they'll naturally be sensitive to your reaction, judging your facial expression, body language, tone of voice, and language. As a leader, you have an opportunity to create trust and build engagement with them.

For instance, let's say an employee comes to you with a problem — any problem you can think of. If you say keep a straight face and flatly say, "I hear you," in isolation, then move the conversation to "Let's get down to business," the initial understanding you tried to convey will not feel genuine.

Instead, begin by actively listening. Show them that you are fully present by leaning in, keeping your arms uncrossed, and nodding along when appropriate. Listen with the intention of trying to understand by placing yourself inside their shoes — not the intention of formulating the quickest response. The key to empathy is trying to really hear the meaning of their words. When listening, be curious about what is affecting this person. You could even pause for a few seconds, if you need time to fully process their words.

When you're ready, you could say, "That sounds really tough. Would you want to share more information with me so I can understand more about where you're coming from and how I may be able to support you?"

In this way, you're acknowledging that their situation is difficult and asking questions to try and better understand how you can help. You're not falsely claiming to know what they're going through. This response will help foster deeper trust and give them a more authentic sense of belonging.

Know that you don't have to have the answers.

Leaders often feel compelled to provide solutions to problems. It makes sense. Solving problems quickly and thoughtfully is likely what got you promoted into your current role. But when it comes to people, you need to take a different approach.

Employees aren't always looking for solutions to personal or emotional challenges — namely because there usually isn't an obvious answer. Yet, time and again, leaders make the mistake of trying to solve the personal problem an employee brings to them. Sometimes the best thing you can do as a manager is give the other person space to talk and feel heard.

When the flood gates open, allow your team member to talk. Let them be the center of the conversation and display your genuine care as they share.

Avoid an autopilot response.

Empathy is not "one-size-fits-all." You can't use the same cut-and-paste language for every member of your team. It's best to take in all the information coming from the other person before formulating your response.

Say, for example, an employee notifies you of something disruptive going on in their personal life. While some people may want you to know that it might affect their work, others may need

more help in figuring things out. To figure out whether your team member needs your help, is simply giving you an update, or is looking for space to vent and be heard — just ask them.

You could say, "Is there something I can do to support you?" If the employee says, "No. I'd rather not talk about it," the most empathetic thing you can do is respect their boundary. You could add, "I respect that. If there is anything I can do to make it easier at work, do reach out."

Having a fluid approach is crucial to displaying empathy in an authentic way that makes employees feel truly understood.

Always, always make the time.

Leadership is about effectively balancing your responsibilities to your team and your role. There might come a time when an employee approaches you to talk, and you have a crucial meeting or family emergency yourself.

Rather than panicking, take the opportunity to display authenticity and honesty. You could say, "I really want to pick this up with you in more detail and see how I can help you. I do have to go to the client meeting right now. Would it be okay if I put a meeting on your calendar for later today or tomorrow?"

Offering to organize the meeting yourself, instead of saying, "My calendar is up to date. Please find a time that is convenient for you," puts the ball in your court and displays your genuine care and willingness to support.

Finally, make sure not to cancel that meeting the next day — make the time for it. You have planted that seed of trust with your employee. Following through with the next step shows them what your genuine priorities are and will make or break the foundation of trust you're trying to form.

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As a leader, you need to understand that the workplace is made up of people, and you're in the privileged role of guiding and supporting them. A part of that work involves understanding what it means to be human. Everyone has a life outside of work that they need to deal with while still fulfilling their professional obligations. You may not have a solution to every problem or challenge that is brought to your attention, but what matters is that you genuinely care for people, validate their feelings, and are willing to offer support.

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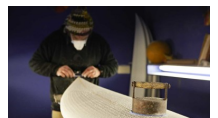
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