



Positive Leadership

Chapter 6: Empathy

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“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” – Stephen Covey

An Introduction to Empathy

In an increasingly complex and fast-moving world, empathy has become a hot topic in leadership. While its relevance was always generally understood, increased attention is being paid to empathy and its role in leadership effectiveness. At the same time, there is misunderstanding about what empathy entails. This can lead to confusion and a reluctance to embrace its potential. Let’s unpack the classic, widely accepted model of empathy.

Researchers have identified three dimensions of empathy that work together to build deep connections and drive organizational success¹. Each dimension serves a different purpose and requires different skills to execute.

1. Cognitive empathy

This is the ability to understand someone else's perspective on an intellectual level. It is not about feeling what they are feeling but rather understanding their mental state and thought process. It is the “thinking side” of empathy.

Much like a good chess player who can think several moves ahead, a leader with high cognitive empathy understands how their team members think and process information. They understand “where they are coming from,” even if they don’t agree with it.

2. Emotional empathy

The ability to feel and share others' emotions. This goes beyond cognitive empathy. It is about creating a genuine emotional connection. In the case of a project setback, for example, a leader with emotional empathy can relate to the frustration one of their team members is feeling inside. This leads to much more authentic and deeper responses as the team member can feel understood.

3. Compassionate empathy

Cognitive and emotional empathy lay the groundwork for the third dimension: compassionate empathy, which turns understanding and feeling into tangible action (otherwise known as empathic concern). This is where empathy goes from being a passive quality to an active tool of leadership. It is not good enough that one understands and feels; empathetic leaders act on those insights.

¹ Goleman, Daniel, Annie McKee, Adam Waytz (2017). Empathy, Harvard Business Review, Emotional Intelligence Series; Goleman, Daniel, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee (2013). Primal Leadership, Harvard Business Review, Emotional Intelligence Series.

I like to think of the above model in terms of the following equations:

$$\text{Cognitive Empathy} \times \text{Emotional Empathy} = \text{Compassionate Empathy}$$
$$\text{Thinking} \times \text{Feeling} = \text{(Appropriate) Action}$$

The Business Case for Empathy

Considerable research highlights the benefits of adopting an empathy-based approach to various aspects of leadership. The following represent some key findings from research which are of particular importance to public sector executives.

1. Increased personal effectiveness

One of the largest studies involved over 500,000 leaders across industries and sectors using 360-feedback data. Out of the 22 competencies assessed, empathy was the third strongest predictor of leadership excellence (the top two were strategic thinking and communication²).

A separate study from Development Dimensions International (DDI) found that high empathy leaders performed at a 40% higher level than that of their peers³, which was realized in critical elements of leadership such as being better able to engage, coach, plan and organize more effectively. Based on these findings, Richard Wellins, Senior Vice President of DDI concluded: "Being able to listen and respond with empathy is overwhelmingly the one interaction skill that outshines all other skills leaders need to be successful. ... The research shows there is no other single leadership skill that is more important."

2. Higher levels of employee engagement

One of the primary ways that high empathy leaders drive organizational excellence is by enhancing employee engagement. This trend is especially pronounced with senior leadership. In one survey of nearly 900 U.S. employees across industries, those with highly empathetic senior leaders reported 76% engagement, compared to only 32% engagement for those with less empathetic leaders⁴.

3. Higher levels of innovation

In the same study cited above, results revealed that employees who worked for highly empathetic leaders were significantly more likely to report being innovative (61%) than those who were working with low-empathy leaders (13%). With high empathy leaders, team members trust they will be supported when they share their ideas. These psychologically safe team members feel it is safe to

² You can make a pretty compelling case as to how empathy informs our ability to think strategically and communicate effectively. Said another way, how can we engage in strategic thinking if we are not aware of our stakeholders and how can we communicate effectively without understanding the needs of our audience?

³ Development Dimensions International (DDI) Newsroom (2016). [What's the #1 Leadership Skill for Overall Success?](#)

⁴ Catalyst (2021). [Empathic Leaders Drive Employee Engagement and Innovation.](#)

take the risk to propose something new. In an environment of fear, it is much safer to stick with the status quo and not rock the boat⁵.

4. Inclusion and belonging

In one recent survey, 87% of respondents reported that demonstrating empathy is essential for leaders to foster an inclusive environment⁶. Another powerful lesson from this research is that without genuine empathy, initiatives relating to diversity and inclusion can ring hollow. Employees may feel that leaders don't genuinely understand or care about the different backgrounds and needs present in their workforce.

5. Resilience and well-being

High empathy leaders positively impact the emotional, psychological and physiological health of their employees. One study⁷ found that when leaders recognize and respond empathetically to employees' worries or suffering, it facilitates "emotional healing" and boosts well-being. In another study, direct reports who work for empathetic leaders reported fewer somatic stress symptoms (like headaches or fatigue) and better daily mental health⁸. By acknowledging employees' struggles and demonstrating understanding (for example, adjusting workloads or providing resources), empathetic leaders provide a form of psychological first aid, helping staff to become more resilient in the face of challenges.

A compelling public sector example comes from New Zealand during the COVID-19 crisis. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern emphasized empathy in her leadership style, communicating with compassion and understanding about the hardships citizens faced. Beyond "resonating with her people on an emotional level," Prime Minister Ardern's approach "also work[ed] remarkably well" by leading to strong public compliance with health measures⁹. Citizens felt that Ardern had their backs. The results of her empathetic approach were high levels of trust and confidence in her leadership. Ultimately, Ardern's was one of the most effective national pandemic responses. As the American newspaper *The Atlantic* boldly proclaimed at the time, "New Zealand's Prime Minister may be the most effective leader on the planet right now!" The business case for empathy is clear.

⁵ Other research shines light on the link between empathy and innovation. High empathy leaders provide emotional support, which makes employees feel safe to experiment. This leads to higher levels of creative problem-solving and elevates curiosity.

Ma, Guangya et al. (2024). Empathetic leadership and employees' innovative behavior: examining the roles of career adaptability and uncertainty avoidance.

⁶ EY Newsroom, New EY US Consulting study: employees overwhelmingly expect empathy in the workplace, but many say it feels disingenuous.

⁷ Jit, R., Sharma, C. S., and Kawatra, M. (2017). Healing a Broken Spirit: Role of Servant Leadership.

⁸ Scott, Brent A. et al. (2010). A daily investigation of the role of manager empathy on employee well-being. Science Direct.

⁹ Friedman, Uri (2020). New Zealand's Prime Minister May Be the Most Effective Leader on the Planet. The Atlantic.

Practical Strategies to Enhance Empathy

1. Seek out other perspectives

One of the key skills of high empathy leaders is taking the perspective of others, which may be considered the operationalization of cognitive empathy. Unfortunately, many leaders do not fully capitalize on the power of this practice, as they imagine how they would feel or think in a particular situation. This approach is necessarily limited and likely problematic, as other people will likely not be just like us or need what we need in the same circumstance.



Rather than treating people the way we would want to be treated, we must treat people the way they wish to be treated.

2. Ask questions

Considerable research demonstrates the benefits of asking questions in personal and professional environments. From accelerating learning, increasing success on romantic dates, and elevating understanding and mutual respect, the science is abundantly clear¹⁰. Here are the best practices:

- a. Use open-ended questions: Use “what”, “how”, or “why” questions to invite expansive thinking. Open-ended questions can uncover new information often revealing hidden answers no one has considered. For example, instead of asking “Is this project on track?”, ask “How are we progressing on this project, and what obstacles do we see?”
- b. Leverage follow-up questions: Don’t stop at one question, dig deeper with follow-ups like “Can you tell me more?” or “Why do you think that happened?”

During a recent interview, author and TED speaker Jeff Wetzler recommended that when asking questions, to “keep digging until you hit oil.” Follow-up questions signal that you’re listening and care, making people feel respected and heard. This encourages team members to open up and share candid information, rather than giving superficial answers.

- c. Explore the unknown: Make it a habit to ask questions like “What are we missing?”, “What assumptions are we making?”, or “What would we do if we could start from scratch?”. Such questions prompt you and your team to surface hidden assumptions, uncover root causes, and consider alternative perspectives.

¹⁰ Check out several evidence-based books on the topic including Wetzler, Jeff (2024). Ask: Tap into the hidden wisdom in people around you for unexpected breakthroughs in leadership and life; Berger, Warner (2018). The Book of Beautiful Questions; Adams, Marilee (2022) Change Your Questions, Change Your Life.

- d. Conduct question bursts for brainstorming: When you're stuck on a tough problem, try Hal Gregersen's "question burst" technique. Gather your team and spend four minutes generating nothing but questions about the challenge – no solutions yet¹¹. Although this rapid-fire questioning (aim for around 15–20 questions) can feel uncomfortable at first, it often reframes the problem in a new way and sparks at least one fresh, valuable idea.
- e. Encourage a questioning culture:



Leaders can create a questioning culture by showing their team that questions are not only welcomed, but they are also valued.

One of the best ways to accomplish this is to respond with appreciation, not defensiveness, when employees ask tough questions or challenge ideas. Leaders can also plant the seed for these behaviours by proactively asking questions such as "What questions or concerns do you have about this project/proposal?" "What am I missing here? What is a topic that we have not discussed but should?"

4. Engage in active listening

The authors of the bestselling book *Crucial Conversations* provide a framework to effectively engage in active listening. They duly note that this approach is particularly effective in high-stakes and conflict situations. It is represented by the acronym [AMPP](#), which stands for:

A: Ask

The first step, asking, gets things rolling. By showing a genuine interest in what's going on with the other person, we can bring potential issues to light. What better avenue do we have to learn another person's perspective than to ask them?

M: Mirror

As the name suggests, this practice involves holding up a mirror to the other person. You reflect what you are observing from their behaviour and tone of voice.

Here's an example of mirroring : If you're sitting across from someone during a conversation and you notice the other person suddenly leans back, arms folded. No words are exchanged, yet you sense something is wrong. If asked, "How are you doing?" the reply is often a highly non-committal, "Fine, fine."

In this case, mirroring is a powerful tool to explore what we just noticed. We can say: "Although I hear you say you're fine, based on your body language and tone of voice, I'm picking up that maybe you are not. I recognize I may be wrong. I wanted to check in with you because that is very important to me."

¹¹ Brown, Eric (2018). [Asking the questions that unlock innovation](#), MIT News, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

P: Paraphrase

Paraphrasing, or restating what we heard in our own words, is one of the most powerful and underutilized ways to demonstrate empathy. Whether our paraphrasing is accurate is almost irrelevant. When we get it right, the other person feels understood. When we are wrong, the other person will correct us. What really matters is the fact that we are making the effort to understand the other person.

P: Prime

Prime means naming “the elephant in the room.” If we do not, people will likely think one of two things: either we do not care about the issue, or we are not smart enough to recognize that there is one.

Here’s an example for setting up a difficult conversation: “I appreciate that this may be a challenging conversation for all of us. My goal is to have a constructive dialogue; to be as positive and forward-looking as possible so that we can understand each other’s perspectives and come to a solution that we each feel good about. Although it may not be perfect, and there may be some contentious disagreements, I feel this is the right thing to do and I’m counting on the fact that we can do this together. What do you say?”

Bonus P: Pause

After asking a question, pause and truly listen to the response without interrupting or rushing to reply. Give people time to think and answer. If silence occurs, resist the urge to fill it. Leaders often have to fight the instinct to provide quick answers. Sometimes the best move is to “stop talking and just listen¹²”. Attentive listening shows respect for employees’ input and often yields insights that wouldn’t surface otherwise.

4. Offer training and development

Despite its importance, very few individuals have been trained in the science and practice of empathy. Executives can invest in leadership development opportunities for themselves and their direct reports that emphasize emotional intelligence and empathy skills.

Such training could include role-playing exercises where managers practice active listening and responding to employees’ emotional cues, or guided reflection on how to handle situations with compassion. The best news: Research shows [empathy is a learnable skill](#) that is amplified through practice¹³.

¹² Somers, Meredith (2023). [How leaders can get the most out of asking questions](#), MIT Sloan.

¹³ Reiss, Helen (2022). [Empathy can be taught and learned with evidence-based education](#), Pud Med.

Empathy: The Skill that Connects Intention to Impact

Empathy is not a soft skill – it is a force multiplier for every other leadership capability. In today's public service environment, where trust is fragile, demands are high, and the pressure to deliver is relentless, empathy becomes the bridge between intention and impact. It is the lens through which we connect more deeply, communicate more clearly, and lead more effectively. The good news? Empathy is not a fixed trait – it's a skill that can be cultivated and strengthened with intention and practice.



Key takeaway: As executives, your ability to model empathetic leadership isn't just a personal asset – it's a [cultural catalyst](#). When leaders demonstrate genuine understanding, people feel seen, valued, and safe to bring their best. And that is when transformation begins.

For more resources on Positive Leadership, access the full [APEX Positive Leadership Toolkit](#).