





The New Power Skill: *Empathy*

Empathetic leadership is the glue that can
bind a team together.

BY ROBIN MILES



Empathy is on track to becoming the most vital skill of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is characterized by technology-driven innovations such as artificial intelligence, robotics, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things that promise to transform the integration of our physical, biological, and digital worlds in unprecedented ways. Yet, technology is only one side of the digital transformation coin. The other side, one that is arguably more vital to the success of this transformation, is the people factor.

Now more than ever before, organizational leaders will need to work in overdrive to ensure that the human element is not lost to the gravitational pull of robotics-oriented digitization. DDI research confirms that empathy tops the list as the most critical driver of overall performance and is one of the distinguishing skills in this new era that will set highly successful leaders apart from average ones. Unlike previous revolutions, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is calling for managers to radically embrace what research analyst Josh Bersin refers to as power skills that push the boundaries of high performance and innovation.

Empathy in different forms

There are three types of empathy: cognitive, affective, and compassionate. Cognitive empathy is the ability to see things from another person's perspective and understand their rationale or way of cognitively processing information. Affective or emotional empathy is the ability to share what someone else is feeling and being able to build strong emotional connections with others. And compassionate empathy, also known as empathic concern, is the ability to mutually share another person's emotions or feelings while also maintaining healthy boundaries to not get pulled in too deeply.

People often mistake empathy for sympathy or pity. Sympathy is the ability to show care or concern for someone's misfortune, and pity is the uncomfortable feeling (commonly in the pit of your stomach) that is evoked by seeing someone in pain or suffering. On the opposite end of the emotional engagement spectrum, indifference or apathy is the unbiased lack of interest or concern about someone's suffering. The emotional engagement continuum (see figure) shows the distinction between these different sentiments and how varying levels of effort correspond directly with the level of emotional understanding and engagement with another person's emotional experience.

An antidote to stress and social unrest

In emotional intelligence (EQ) science, empathy is an anchor skill that requires managers to take an others-centered approach to understanding and connecting more meaningfully with their team members. Neuroscience reveals that the human brain interprets stressors like uncertainty as threats, and when triggered, a person's limbic system goes into overdrive, causing a fight, flight, freeze, or faint response. That is referred to as an amygdala hijack during which a person's ability to effectively self-regulate their cognitive, emotional, and relational responses becomes impaired.

According to research, empathy shown to a person experiencing high levels of stress is like an antidote that lowers the cortisol levels in the brain and activates the parasympathetic nervous system. Just knowing that their boss truly understands what they are going through in life can serve to diffuse a person's stress responses, which causes them to relax, think more clearly, and focus on being productive. That is why managers with a strong capacity for empathy are far better resourced to successfully lead teams through disruption and change while also maintaining team member engagement and achieving high performance outcomes.

The 2020 pandemic engendered a collective awakening across all global social, political, and organizational domains to the call for more humane leadership practices. Leaders from the C-suite to the front lines discovered that the ability to genuinely lead with compassion and understanding was one of the biggest contributing factors in helping employees navigate unforeseen volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous work-family integration challenges.

The need for empathetic leadership elevated as the crisis prolonged, company budgets and profit margins became constrained, and employees grew to be more fearful about job stability. As Brené Brown states in *Daring to Lead*, “Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind. Daring leaders who live into their values are never silent about the hard things.”

Executive leaders with empathic agency exhibited care and compassion by having more frequent and transparent communication exchanges with employees by email, virtual town hall meetings, and “Ask Me Anything” Q&A sessions. When leaders take sincere measures to be honest, straightforward, and open about cost-containment measures; performance expectations; and plans to keep everyone safe, healthy, and employed, it redirects negative emotional contagion and reinforces employees’ trust that leaders have their best interests at heart.

Practical strategies

A foundational first step toward empathetic leadership is developing a healthy internal self-awareness (understanding how you see yourself) and external self-awareness (understanding how others see you). Although many people believe they know themselves well, research presented in the article “What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)” indicates that only 10–15 percent of participants met the criteria of having high self-awareness. Whereas being internally self-aware is associated with high relationship satisfaction and emotional regulation, external self-awareness is more closely linked to showing empathy and understanding others’ perspectives.

The combination of having both internal and external self-awareness can also help managers avoid the common pitfall of sacrificing their own self-care to dedicate more mindful attention to their team’s needs. Having a growth mindset, being honest about their strengths and weaknesses, and curiously engaging in 360-degree assessments and feedback conversations to become more familiar with their blind spots is a great start to managers building self-awareness.

Seven empathetic habits

It is safe to say that leading with empathy is no small feat. It takes a growth mindset, self-acceptance, and resilience to cultivate. Helen Riess, a leading researcher on empathy and author of *The Empathy Effect*, developed the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. model. A closer look into each of its seven factors offers leaders practical ways to understand and build positive empathetic habits.

Eye contact. Looking someone directly in the eyes is a critical component of nonverbal communication and essential to creating a positive connection with someone during a conversation. People in positions of authority who practice making good eye contact convey to others that they are approachable, trustworthy, and open to developing a mutually respectful relationship.

If held too long, eye contact can make people feel uncomfortable, so holding one’s gaze for a fraction of a second before moving on is sufficient enough to establish a meaningful connection. Spending more time communicating with

Emotional Engagement Continuum



their eyes is a practice that managers can use both when meeting team members in person as well as on video.

Muscles of facial expression. Great eye contact skills can support leaders in paying closer attention to messages conveyed and received through other facial expressions. Facial movements are another nonverbal form of expressing prominent emotions that convey information about how someone is feeling, like love, joy, pain, happiness, and sadness. Micro-expressions, such as a slight lifting of an eyebrow, widened eyelids, and a lopsided smile, can provide deeper insights into a person's emotional well-being. Leaders with a keen ability to notice how individuals express emotions through facial movements have a higher empathic capacity.

Posture. Independent of facial expression, how a person positions their body communicates a ton about their emotional state. Someone who is slouching over may be signaling that they are feeling sad or dejected; conversely, a person sitting tall and erect is likely conveying a level of confidence, pride, or happiness.

It is important for managers not to overgeneralize these nonverbal cues but to take time observing their team members' unique body positioning habits before drawing conclusions about what they mean. The key is paying close enough attention to notice postures that are highly uncharacteristic and probing to find out whether there is something to be concerned about.

Affect. In psychology, *affect* refers to the outward expression of a person's emotion or mood that they typically communicate through nonverbal facial expressions. Many organizations have back-to-back meeting cultures with no time in between for staff to reset their mind and resolve emotions that may have come up. Understanding an employee's mood or what is going on in their heart or mind from moment to moment (or meeting to meeting) can be tricky for managers.

A simple yet empathetic way to show concern about a team member's state of mind is to ask: How are you feeling today? or Did something happen earlier in the day that you would like to share? Such questions will likely open the door to provide much-needed coaching or support.

Tone of voice. A person's tone of voice is critical to empathy because, according to Albert Mehrabian's communication model, it accounts for more than 38 percent of nonverbal emotions that a person communicates. In empathic communication, experts say that tone of voice is even more important to pay attention to than words.

Common ways that individuals audibly express emotions during a conversation are through volume, rhythm, and pace. For example, a manager may notice that a team member elevates his voice pitch when describing something he is passionate about and conversely lowers his voice when he is feeling ashamed about a missed deadline. Again, understand that such cues provide leaders valuable insights about what their employees are experiencing; attuning to those cues helps leaders provide meaningful support that employees will appreciate.

Hearing the whole person. Managers can cultivate the art of hearing the whole person as they increase their emotional self-awareness and begin to skillfully use verbal (tone of voice) and nonverbal (eye contact, facial expression, posture, and affect) cues to connect emotionally with their team members. Hearing the whole person requires managers to be fully present and focused when conversing with their employees. Minimizing distractions and resisting the urge to multitask during meetings are vital to conveying to direct reports that they have their manager's undivided attention.

At this level of acumen, leaders demonstrate the agency to hear and respond empathetically, which contributes to developing caring relationships with their employees that go much deeper beneath the surface.

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Your response. This final factor is more about how leaders respond to their own emotions than how they respond empathically to others. As managers become more engaged in developing their empathic acumen, maintaining a healthy awareness and relationship with their emotions becomes increasingly important. Just as employees become overstressed and emotionally burned out, managers do as well.

The more in touch leaders are with their personality and emotions, the better they will be able to understand their team members' perspectives and needs. The oxygen mask rule of self-care is always an essential principle to remember, particularly during a crisis. Managers who practice healthy self-care habits have a greater capacity to lead with empathy.

A team-building multiplier

When fully embraced, empathy is a multiplier that fosters trust and psychological safety, engagement, higher productivity, and stronger collaboration and teamwork. Genuine curiosity and empathic listening are hallmarks of leaders who have embraced a coaching mindset and are key ingredients to developing trust and building a psychologically safe team culture. Coaching is an art that requires courage and disciplined practice to cultivate the habit of asking thoughtful, open-ended questions and resisting the impulse to be instructional or tell employees how to do their jobs. For example, managers can jump-start team meetings by asking everyone to share



a one-word answer to how their weekend was, or during a one-on-one, they can pose check-in questions such as:

- I'm interested to know how everything went at the conference last week—what are one or two things you experienced that stood out for you?
- What is top of mind for you this week?
- What goals are you aiming to accomplish this week?
- What can I do to support you between now and our next meeting?

As the employee responds, managers should practice listening with an intention to empathetically connect to what the person is saying. Probes like “Tell me more” show that managers are open to developing a deeper understanding of their employee's experiences and perspectives.

In a world of endless technological distractions and information overload, honing the art of empathic listening is much easier said than done. Microsoft found that a person's average attention span is only about eight seconds. Managers taking time to prepare to have meaningful interactions with their staff aids in building autonomy and conveying sincere interest in team members' work. Active listening also enables managers to quickly recognize and address signs of latency and unmet needs such as burnout, work or family issues, anxiety, and team member collaboration problems before they lead to disengagement. As a result, employees feel empowered and intrinsically stimulated to be accountable, their work becomes more purposeful, and they are more inclined to push beyond their limits to attain higher goals.

Role-modeling empathic listening and monitoring conversational turn-taking strategies during meetings foster

belonging and respect for everyone's contribution to the team's success. That involves establishing engagement norms that encourage team members to be attentive to subtle and overt cues that one person has finished talking and being conscious of the amount of space and energy they are taking up by talking during meetings versus the amount of space they are making for other team members to share.

One way the team can put this into practice is by applying the 80–20 rule: Spend 80 percent or more of the time listening and only 20 percent or less talking. Without such rules of engagement, especially for virtual meetings, it can feel like an arduous game of verbal double-dutch just to get a word in edgewise. Setting a positive example for engaging with empathy and being open, honest, and transparent when communicating with their employees about expectations, shifting priorities, and accomplishments provides a sense of safety and confidence that the team has all the information and resources to achieve performance objectives.

In this evolving Fourth Industrial Revolution, harnessing empathy's power has the potential of being a total game changer for managers and their teams. It requires high self-awareness and the desire to connect in more meaningful and positive ways with people. Ultimately, empathetic leadership can unite a team as well as serve as the spark that empowers the team to achieve extraordinary outcomes.

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