Empathetic Leadership: Transforming Workplaces

with Compassion and Understanding

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Introduction

Soft skills are important in almost every job, as they help you in effectively communicating with coworkers, clients, and other important people at work, making for a happier and more productive workplace. Soft skills, proven crucial in healthcare, are also paramount in the business environment (Ratka, 2018). Among these, empathy is conspicuous and closely linked to ethical and servant leadership and even gives rise to a new model, the empathetic leadership model (Kock et al., 2019; Mallén et al., 2020; Rego et al., 2018). Its impact on organizational cultures and effectiveness is a relatively new but significant development. Moreover, empathetic leadership has been identified as a critical factor in reducing employee turnover (Arghode et al., 2022), a pressing issue noted within the recent University of Phoenix Career Institute® 2024 Career Optimism Index® (*Index*). Specifically, this report revealed that more than half of all working Americans are actively seeking new job opportunities.

As Kock et al. (2019) asserted, empathy in an organization yields significant positive outcomes across various aspects such as workplace culture, employee satisfaction, teamwork, leadership effectiveness, and overall productivity. For instance, their research reveals that empathy fosters productive work environments and promotes team collaboration, as it encourages open communication, fostering a work culture built on respect and trust. According to Miralles et al. (2024), a thriving, efficient, and beneficial workplace is founded on the bedrock of mutual empathy among its members. Empathy and compassion involve understanding and reciprocating colleagues' emotions, fostering improved teamwork and communication. These authors posited that when empathy is demonstrated, there is a potential for a deeper connection between leaders and their teams. Results such as these cultivate a sense of trust and respect

across the organization and promote emotional consciousness, instilling a sense of hope and optimism for the future. This underscores the intangible benefits of empathy in the workplace.

Defining Acts of Empathy

Empathy stands out for the value it brings to both personal and professional relationships. Emotional awareness, the ability to recognize and understand one's feelings and those of others and respond appropriately to others' emotions, are significant components of empathy (Deliu, 2019; Veiten et al., 2024). Active listening is another crucial trait of empathetic individuals, involving giving full attention to the speaker without interruption or judgment, thereby acknowledging their feelings and experiences. The ability to place oneself in another's shoes and imagine their perspective is crucial for understanding others' feelings and actions (Abramson, 2021). However, understanding feelings is just one aspect of empathy.

Other aspects include kindness, often manifested as a desire to comfort or assist someone in distress, which is another significant component along with nonverbal communication, such as interpreting body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, which also plays a crucial role in understanding how someone is feeling (Abramson, 2021). Understanding how others feel provides support for one's emotional control, the ability to connect with others' feelings while managing one's own emotions, enables individuals to support others without becoming overly distressed and to maintain their behavior under stressful conditions (Abramson, 2021; Byrne, 2024; Vieten et al., 2024). The ability to empathize with another person helps to maintain healthy emotional relationships.

Validation is another key component of empathy, where empathetic individuals show respect and acknowledgment for others' emotions and feelings, fostering trust and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Byrne et al., 2024). In addition to validation, authenticity, and

empathy enable individuals to provide genuine care and support, potentially leading to the development of meaningful relationships (Burgess et al., 2023). These researchers revealed that by integrating all the characteristics associated with empathy, individuals can cultivate an open-minded approach, refrain from judging others' emotions, and validate their experiences as real and significant. This approach can allow leaders to facilitate deep connections with others, leading to understanding, support, and robust interpersonal interactions (Burgess et al., 2023; Eklund & Meranius, 2021). When leaders develop strong interpersonal relationships with others, especially followers, they can positively impact psychological safety and inclusion in the workplace.

Psychological Safety and Inclusion

Empathetic leaders create environments where individuals experience acceptance and psychological safety, which refers to a work environment in which people feel secure being themselves, expressing their idealism, and taking risks within their workspace without fear of reprisal (McCalla et al., 2023). To reinforce this type of environment, the leader must be willing to engage with followers and be an active listener while demonstrating empathy and authenticity with the capacity to take responsibility for their actions while promoting a work culture where all followers are empowered to freely voice their opinions and concerns (Gardiner, 2024; Miralles et al., 2024). Leaders should be genuinely concerned about followers' personal development and well-being while advocating for inclusivity and diversity because followers who feel psychologically safe are innovative, highly productive, and less likely to leave the organization because they experience less stress and are content with their work and work environment (Gardiner, 2024; Lyons, 2020).

Psychological safety and empathy are deeply intertwined because leaders create psychologically safe environments when they are empathetic, support open communication, are less defensive, and encourage trust (Gardiner, 2024; Miralles et al., 2024). When followers know their experiences and feelings matter, they are more willing to feel psychologically safe and, as such, will be open, honest, and contribute positively to the organization's mission and goals. In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, psychological safety is a nice-to-have and a necessity for creating safe and inclusive work cultures. Such cultures allow fully engaging employees to adjust rapidly to changes and successfully navigate uncertainties to achieve organizational goals (McCalla, 2015; Miralles et al., 2024). The role of empathy in fostering psychological safety is a key takeaway, as it significantly impacts employee retention and satisfaction (McCalla et al., 2023).

In addition, a psychologically safe and inclusive culture promotes individual development, job satisfaction, and organizational success. The 2024 Career Optimism Index® (*Index*) confirmed that American workers are less than favorable about their prospects of maintaining employment at current employers due to the recent uptick in layoffs and economic strife, which has caused the remaining workers to experience psychological uncertainties about their positions, job reassignments, work intensification, changes in management, and additional layoffs (Elser et al., 2019). This finding is compounded by the *Index* finding that employers are looking outside of their companies for talent and largely ignoring current staff members; this approach may reduce employee satisfaction and trust in organizational leadership and lacks empathy toward employees who have spent time, money, or both working towards career development goals. Nevertheless, leaders that deploy empathy may motivate individuals to actively pursue more possibilities for talent or skill enhancement. These leaders exhibit empathy

while fostering trust and cultivating emotional bonds with employees (Deliu, 2019). These procedures establish psychologically secure settings that promote employee retention by fully including individuals in adapting quickly to changes and effectively navigating uncertainty to accomplish corporate objectives. Inclusive work environments are characterized by empathy and psychological safety, as they foster human relationships and positively influence communication. Individuals have a sense of security when they can freely express their true selves, share their thoughts and opinions, and take bold actions without worrying about negative consequences (McCalla, 2015; McCalla et al., 2023).

The Role of Empathy and Psychological Safety in Leadership

Empathy is a catalyst between excellent and mediocre leaders due to emotional factors rather than academic acumen and has been closely associated with ethical and servant leadership (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018; Llyas et al., 2020; Mallén et al., 2020; Peng & Lin, 2017). Negative leadership habits and traits can become ingrained in an organization, putting too much pressure on it and changing its state over time (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Rego et al. (2017) observed that ethical and authentic leaders demonstrate what they advocate in their words and actions.

In contrast, empathy fosters a more inclusive and supportive work environment. When employees feel understood and valued, it contributes to a positive atmosphere where people are more likely to enjoy coming to work, reducing stress and lowering employee turnover (Avey et al., 2009). Sharifirad (2013) and Kock et al. (2019) found that empathetic leadership and coworker relationships increase employee satisfaction and engagement, positing that employees who perceive their managers and colleagues as empathetic are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, feel loyal to the company, and go above and beyond in their roles. This cohesiveness can exist even when managing trauma survivors in the workplace.

Understanding Trauma Survivors in the Workplace

Workplaces are largely heterogeneous, with diverse work groups, including members who might have psychological trauma. Manning (2022) found that approximately six in ten men and five in ten women have experienced at least one psychological trauma, and over 5% of the world's population will experience some form of trauma-related PTSD. These employees might experience an emotional response to distressing events that exceed an individual's ability to appropriately reason through a situation or event (Ross, 2024).

Empathetic leaders need to understand that psychological trauma can significantly influence how employees interact with colleagues, manage stress, and respond to challenges at work (Short, 2024). Ross's Psychology Today blog (2024) posited that unresolved trauma can manifest in various ways, from absenteeism and trust issues to sudden outbursts and decreased productivity. Ross believes leaders should acknowledge trauma's impact and foster empathy and validation; they should create a culture of empathy, understanding, and validation, encouraging open dialogue about past experiences without fear of judgment or stigma. Ensuring psychological safety is equally essential in the work environment and will allow employees to feel comfortable discussing individual needs, concerns, and emotions without fear of retribution (Manning, 2022; Ross, 2024).

Empathetic leadership, appropriate Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), and other work-life balance programs can help mitigate the effects of trauma on affected employees (Ross, 2024). Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) are workplace benefits that provide support and resources to employees facing personal or work-related challenges. EAPs are workplace

initiatives specifically created to assist employees in managing personal and professional challenges that could impact their job productivity, physical health, and overall welfare. The goal of empathetic leaders might be to consider policies and procedures that benefit all employees, including those with trauma, building a workplace where all can thrive and contribute to the organization's overall effectiveness.

Empathetic Leadership and Employee Engagement

When employees feel understood and valued, it contributes to a positive atmosphere where people are more likely to enjoy coming to work. This can reduce stress and increase self-efficacy while improving performance (Tavakoli, 2010; Bhaduri, 2019). Empathetic leadership and positive coworker relationships increase employee satisfaction and engagement because employees who perceive their managers and colleagues as empathetic are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, feel loyal to the company, and go above and beyond (Kock et al., 2019). Empathetic work environments foster a transparent culture founded on trust, which appreciates many perspectives and supports individuals in cultivating a sense of inclusion. The individuals desire to uphold the organization's mission and ideals (McCalla et al., 2023).

Psychological safety among employees increases the likelihood of their total engagement, active participation in collaborative problem-solving, and contribution to creative processes. When fully engaged in the work environment, individuals likely have developed a sense of trust for their leaders and the organization and are more inclined to exceed expectations (Goods, 2022). Empathetic leaders create empathetic environments where individuals experience acceptance and psychological safety. Fostered by empathetic leadership, empathetic workplace environments often have increased the creation of workplace cultures grounded in trust, allowing and encouraging different points of view and an environment that encourages and assists

individuals in developing a sense of belonging and they want to support the organization's mission and values (Langford et al., 2022; McCalla et al., 2023). Psychological safety among employees increases the likelihood of their total engagement, active participation in collaborative problem-solving, and contribution to creative processes (Ross, 2024). When individuals fully engage in the work environment, they develop a sense of trust for their leaders and the organization and are more inclined to exceed expectations (Goods, 2022).

<p align="center">**Empathetic Leadership Models**</p>

Empathy in the workplace is embodied in several leadership models and theories. Servant leadership is one such model; servant leadership places the service of the leader to others as the primary goal, thus driving feelings of empathy. Similarly, the empathetic leadership model places empathy at the hub of leadership activities and drives the human-centric leadership model by placing the onus of understanding and connecting with employees and their emotions as a precursor to developing effective and supportive work environments (Kock et al., 2019). The full-range leadership model, which ranges from laissez-faire to transactional and transformational leadership, acknowledges the importance of empathy in increasing efficiency and employee success (Galloway, 2022). These models underscore the importance of empathetic leadership because each model is grounded in building trust, collaboration, and overall organizational effectiveness. Goods (2022) found that ethical leadership characteristics drive ethical decision-making, underpinning each of the aforementioned leadership models.

Servant Leadership Model

Servant leaders are often considered servants first and focused on what serves another's highest priority and needs, creating work environments built on trust. As such, followers of servant leaders believe their leaders appreciate and empower them because they look out for their

best interests (Greenleaf, 1977; Ingram, 2016; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Tischler et al., 2016). Research has found that followers often define servant leaders as humble, empathetic, open, and demonstrators of moral reasoning who strive for the common good and positively affect organizational health by increasing employee engagement, commitment, growth, and well-being (Caldwell et al., 2017; Jiang & Lou, 2018; McBath, 2018; Mulinge, 2018).

Empathetic Leadership Model

The empathetic leadership model suggests that the emotional aspects between leaders and followers should be a central tenant of effective organizational leadership (Kock et al., 2019). Like servant leadership outcomes, empathetic leadership outcomes have been found to benefit work environments, improve employee behavior and retention, and reduce organizational turnover (Ma et al., 2024). Underscoring this model is empathy; rather than relying on conversations and feedback related to workplace events and tasks, the framework is grounded in motivation and support through organic engagement and communication about individual support and security, thus increasing engagement and psychological safety. The findings suggested that psychological safety and increased engagement improve organizational performance (Kock et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2024).

Full-Range Leadership Model and Empathy-Leadership in Motion

The full-range leadership model may be a model that facilitates both servant leadership and empathetic leadership (Galloway, 2022). For instance, full-range leadership uses different leadership principles based on the real world with team members. As such, leaders may use transactional methods to gain organizational outcomes but can also use transformational constructs such as idealized influence, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation to provide leadership at individual levels. Empathetic leadership, as well

as components of servant leadership, can be used throughout the entire range and are especially important in components of transactional leadership and individualized consideration (Northhouse,2022). These issues are essential when balancing empathy with other leadership traits, such as decisiveness or authority.

A leader's ability to balance empathy with other leadership traits is vital for effective leadership, and specific strategies are needed to accomplish this balance (Galloway, 2022). Empathy does not mean weakness when it comes to managing difficult conversations. It enables the leader to address significant concerns while acknowledging emotions. Empathy is not a sign of weakness but a strength that enhances other leadership qualities, such as vision, decision-making, purpose, and accountability. Proficient leaders achieve an equilibrium by integrating empathy with the capacity to make difficult choices while focusing on accountability. An empathetic leader sets expectations while ensuring everyone is accountable for achieving the goals (Galloway, 2022). However, empathetic leaders are human and are open to deleterious thoughts and actions; thus, leaders must also constantly stay vigilant for adverse events such as bias, regardless of intentionality.

Leader Bias

Implicit and intentional bias (or intentional belief) are two opposing forms of attitude formation toward individuals and groups. Sigur and Donofrio (2024) found that implicit bias occurs largely unconsciously, whereas intentional bias or belief is usually rooted in one's formation of moral beliefs about other people and situations. In the case of intentional bias, moral reasoning can lead to the judgment of others, often harsh, unfair, or untrue judgment. They also found that these two forms of bias have been linked to systemic discrimination; thus, leaders must mitigate their biases when leading other people and groups. We all have unconscious

underlying biases. Therefore, leaders must acknowledge their own through self-reflection and encourage team members to explore their underlying biases, avoid assumptions, refrain from making hasty judgments about a situation or individual, and approach both with empathy.

Leaders should create inclusive, safe environments where individuals feel like they belong so they can grow and learn (McCalla et al., 2023). One effective method for leaders to use in their quest to mitigate their personal biases is self-reflection. Self-reflection compels individuals to consider their actions from a values perspective before responding (Goods, 2022). It is a continuum disciplined and rigorous form of thinking that requires individuals to be true to themselves and be willing to address their weaknesses and value constraints or contentions through critically examining their thoughts, actions, beliefs, and value systems. When faced with a conflict that challenges their values systems, they must assess their values while comparing their views to opposing viewpoints, purge inconsistencies, and make the right decision when warranted (Goods, 2022). Leaders who self-reflect can foster diverse and inclusive work environments when focusing on empathy because they are apt to consider how others feel and experience the world.

DEIB Training and Empathy

Diversity training can create a culture of inclusivity. Leaders must support diversity and inclusion to help address biases and create inclusive and equitable work cultures while ensuring all voices are heard and respected. Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB)-focused development is important because it emphasizes employees' psychological safety and mental well-being through the encouragement of belonging programs (McCalla et al., 2023). Some programs tied to organizational DEIB initiatives and other programs driving empathy might include Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that offer mental health benefits, paid time off,

flexible work schedules, maternity and paternity leave for births and adoptions, and other employee-centric programs. Further, leaders should encourage creating employee resource groups (ERGs) so workers with similar backgrounds or hobbies can meet, share experiences, and help each other.

ERGs have been found to improve understanding, belonging, allyship, and empathy within organizations (Green, 2018). Organizations with ERGs often encourage organizational community by allowing and encouraging groups to form for added employee support; these groups are often formed by employee characteristics such as sexual orientation, race, or mutual interest groups. These groups may go beyond organizational support meetings and become active in outside events to further propagate empathy and belonging, with programs such as underprivileged school volunteer work, foodbank work, or other types of social engagement (Colgan & McKearney, 2012). The intended outcome of the proposed programs is a higher level of mutual understanding, leading to improved psychological safety and empathy in the work environment.

Promoting an open and varied culture by valuing and recognizing different points of view and backgrounds can help team members understand each other better. Reward programs that regularly recognize and thank workers for their work can boost morale and show their contributions are valued and appreciated. Creating and using fair and effective ways to settle disagreements will encourage workers to do so in a way that shows empathy, leading to a more peaceful workplace. Empathetic leadership with proper DEIB training, EAP systems, and ERGs increases positive workplace engagement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the research done for this paper, further research is needed. This paper mostly uses leadership constructs and "in-person" working environment principles. More research should be conducted to understand better the implications of empathetic leadership on remote teams and work environments. This research could also focus on the best methods for relaying empathy to remote employees. Further research is needed to better understand the specific mechanics behind the finding that empathy increases psychological safety. For instance, a psychology-based study might be able to determine if empathy has a direct correlation to the stress levels of employees. Findings from this type of research might directly benefit employees' mental and physical health and general team performance.

Conclusion

The characteristic of empathy is not just a soft skill but a powerful tool in leading teams. It requires the leader to step into others' shoes and shift the focus from their needs and feelings. Empathetic approaches to leadership allow leaders to emotionally support their team members, listen to their concerns, and be less demanding. This shift in empathy-focused leadership style can make team members feel valued and understood, fostering a more positive, psychologically safe, and productive work environment. Organizations are responsible for employees' physical and psychological health by establishing safe environments and proper policies and procedures. Empathetic leadership is one step toward increasing employee safety while creating improved performance levels.

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