



Empathy: The Number-One Leadership Skill for Creating a Mentally Healthy Workforce

Description

Part Three of a Six-Part Series

Empathetic leadership has always been important. But it *really* matters right now. The COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout have created extreme, accelerated change in a very compressed time frame. People's lives at work and at home have been turned upside down. All of this has been very hard on their mental and emotional health.

In the last two columns (click [here](#) and [here](#) to review), we've talked about how important it is to assess where your organization is on the well-being spectrum and to start working to reduce the stigma around mental health issues. Today we're going to take a look at what might be the single most important leadership skill for creating a mentally healthy workforce.

When people are stressed and anxious, the ability to show empathy is the most important skill a leader can have. In challenging times, building trust and engagement really matters, and empathy is the cornerstone of those connections.

How do you become a more empathetic leader? First, it's crucial to know the difference between empathy and sympathy. When we have sympathy for someone, we feel sorry for them. When we have empathy, we understand, feel, and share their pain. We are able to put ourselves in their shoes. (Brené Brown says empathy is feeling *with* people, not just feeling *for* them.) When we feel empathy, we are able to make a real and meaningful connection with people and pave the way to help them find workable solutions.

Practicing empathy requires a very individualized approach. We must create a personalized and purposeful approach. We must build teams one human at a time. We must build a culture of wellness one human at a time.

A few tips for becoming more empathetic in your leadership:

Get intentional about becoming a caring leader. When we shift our mindset and expectations, we truly *lean in* as leaders. This is when we're able to make a real difference. And knowing that we changed someone's life for the better is one of the best feelings we'll ever experience.

Work tirelessly to break down the stigma. Talk openly about mental health issues. Give people a safe place to land. This begins with creating a culture of psychological safety, which is vital to a healthy company.

Psychological safety is the feeling that one can speak up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes without punishment or humiliation. It might be one of the most important characteristics of a resilient organization. And it is certainly important in issues around mental and emotional wellness. When people feel safe to tell you the truth in general—when they are comfortable speaking up when they know they have a problem—you are more likely to take action early. The assessments we discussed a couple of weeks ago will help start healthy dialogue.

It is crucial to allow people to feel their emotions and talk about it when they are having a tough time. This is not a weakness. [Jay Kaplan](#), MD, FACEP, medical director of care transformation at LCMC Health in New Orleans, spoke as part of our month-long [Gratitude Symposium](#). He says we need to normalize and reframe feelings. He tells folks, "The depth of your feelings is the depth of your humanity."

Dr. Kaplan also talks about the importance of leaders' sharing with employees how we are feeling. For instance: "I've felt sad; I've felt afraid; I've felt angry." This gives people permission to do the same. In this way, we can make empathy a habit.

Be accessible. Letting people know it's okay to come to you with tough messages promotes openness and trust. Be willing to hear honest feedback about what's wrong. It will build trust and make your organization stronger.

Be a good listener. This is a fundamental part of being a great communicator (which we will discuss in a later column) and a vital part of showing others that you're interested in them. When we strive to be interested rather than interesting, we show people we care.

When talking to others, listen actively. It's all too easy to spend your time calculating your response and not really listening. Try to stay focused on understanding what the person is saying, both verbally and non-verbally. Summarize what they are saying, and confirm that what you think they said is actually what they meant. When people don't feel heard or listened to, it's upsetting. It damages relationships.

Finally, work to build emotional bank accounts. Stephen Covey talks about the emotional bank account in terms of building trust with employees. I've always seen that bank account as the reservoir that feeds passion, purpose, and the desire to make a difference.

Often people show up at the beginning of their career with a fully loaded bank account. For example, I love to speak to a graduating class of nurses. These are some of the most engaged and excited people ever. They can't wait to start their journey. Over time, though, the nature of that work can drain the emotional bank account (not only for nurses but for all healthcare workers). It's up to leaders to make regular deposits to counteract the withdrawals.

This is not only true for healthcare; all industries have their challenges and stressors. The good news is that over the years, we've found some tactics that work well for keeping employees engaged and connected to the larger sense of purpose that keeps them going and to the organization as a whole. In next week's column, we'll cover some of the most impactful.

If you'd like to access a few relevant resources—The Well-Being Handbook (eBook), The Well-Being Tool Kit, and The Well-Being Video—please visit <https://thegratitudegroup.com/faculty/quint-studer/>.

Date Created

September 7, 2021

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