



Why Empathy Is the Most Important Skill a Leader Can Develop Right Now

Description

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

It's tempting to think, *Well, things are starting to open up now, and life is getting back to normal. We made it through, so let's get back to business as usual.* What you may not realize is that employees may still be suffering. For some people, the stress and anxiety may just now be catching up to them. In many cases, businesses are still trying to figure out how to move forward. (Come back to the office? Keep working from home? Move to a hybrid approach?) This means employees are having to navigate even more change.

When people are stressed and anxious, the ability to show empathy is the most important skill a leader can have. In hard times, building trust and engagement really matters, and empathy is the cornerstone of those connections. Recently we heard from two experts who've provided great insights about the importance of empathy. [Jay Kaplan](#), MD, FACEP, medical director of care transformation at LCMC Health in New Orleans, and [Liz Jazwiec, RN](#), who is an authority on leadership, employee engagement, and service excellence, both spoke as part of our month-long [Gratitude Symposium](#). Below are just a few of the bits of wisdom I gleaned from their presentations:

- **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.
- **Communication is more important than ever.** Do it in a way that doesn't add to fear and anxiety. For example, as Liz suggests, you might decide to update your team every day at 10:00 like clockwork. If you're not sure, say, "We don't know." You don't have to sugarcoat things. She adds that what you can do is *acknowledge, ask, and appreciate*—and constantly affirm your belief in the capability of the team.
- **Don't communicate only as a group, but also one-on-one.** Talk separately to each employee who reports to you. Figure out what matters to them. Don't assume anything. For example, you might think they'd rather continue working from home, but the truth might be the opposite. You may find out that their goals have changed, and they see their future in a different light. The only way to know is to spend time with people individually. Only then can you align with what's important to them. This is

crucial in making sure you hang onto talent.

- **Give them the psychological safety to tell the truth and be vulnerable.** It is crucial for leaders to allow people to feel their emotions, and to talk about it when they are having a tough time. This is not a weakness. Dr. Kaplan says we need to normalize and reframe feelings. He says he tells folks, “The depth of your feeling is the depth of your humanity.”

- **Pay attention to people’s personal struggles. Maybe you can help.** Dr. Kaplan points out that as leaders we may have no idea what employees are experiencing and feeling. We don’t know if they’ve lost a family member or a good friend. We don’t know if their partner has lost their job. We don’t know if their kids are struggling. The purpose of meeting one-on-one is to determine what they most need and to alleviate their issues where you can. There may be things you can do to help that they’ve never considered.

When you ask what an employee needs, don’t just say, “I understand.” Ask what you can do and get very specific. I loved it when Liz said, “Ask what people need from you, not what they need from the Universe, but from you.”

- **Get intentional about creating a great place to work.** We tend to talk a lot about building resilience in employees, and that is important. But one of the most empathetic things we can do is to improve our work environment and culture. For example:

- We can work to create close-knit teams. Being part of a strong, collaborative team is incredibly powerful. In fact, it can alleviate burnout and create a strong sense of belonging. (To read a recent column on this subject, [click here](#).)

- We can do what Dr. Kaplan calls “emotional debriefing connecting rounds.” We can share with employees how we are feeling. “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.

- We can create a “what’s going well” culture. Dr. Kaplan talks about showcasing “legacy moments,” which are those times when an employee made a difference in someone’s life. Liz talks about this in terms of encouraging people to “find the glimmers.” We can intentionally create cultures that celebrate these moments.

- We can rethink the Employee Assistance Program. Dr. Kaplan talks about moving the EAP from being where people go when they are in distress to being more of a resource to help people stay well. This is one way we can promote personal resilience skills.

Being a more empathetic leader is not a moment in time. We need to make empathy part of our being. That takes ongoing work and constant practice.

Dr. Kaplan quoted St. Francis of Assisi who said, “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words.” He was talking about gratitude, but this is also true of empathy. The more we practice empathy, the more empathetic we become. Our employees should be able to feel that we care deeply about them—because when we get in the habit of empathy, we really do.

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