



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



A top priority for most organizations and institutions is to look beyond traditional strategies for management development and recruitment to empower leaders so they are capable of making the company and the people within it thrive. Besides performance objectives, influential leaders need to have the social skills to empower, motivate and support the employees on their team. One of those skills, perhaps unexpectedly, is empathy. This article focuses on leading with empathy, which is one of the best ways to support employees through their career goal milestones.

What is empathy? Why is it important?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It allows us to connect with others, feel with them, care about their well-being, and act with compassion.¹ Empathy is crucial because it helps us understand how others are feeling and helps us to respond appropriately to the situation. As much as we seek empathy from others when we are feeling down, we also need to show empathy to others – studies show that empathy is a precursor to more helping behaviours.²

Empathy is a tool in everyone's emotional intelligence toolbox, typically associated with social behaviour, and like many other tools, it must be practiced to wield it appropriately and often. However, when practiced regularly, empathy is critical to all parts of our lives by helping us get along, work more effectively, and thrive within our given communities.

What makes a good leader?

A good leader possesses a clear vision, courage, integrity, honesty, humility and focus.³ Yet, they also know how to help people reach their goals, so empathy is an excellent tool for them to use in these situations.

Excellent leaders are not afraid to use their vulnerabilities to show empathy to someone to help that person overcome an obstacle. An empathic leader in the workplace may do this by:

- Knowing their team members
- Keeping their mind open to new ideas



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- Taking care of their employee's need for resources
- Uplifting employees with praise
- Respecting others equally, despite rank in the company
- Continuing to learn what their employees need to succeed and thrive

By implementing the excellent leader actions listed above you will show the employees under your direction that you are not only strong but also that you care about supporting them.⁴

Tips on supporting employees

Supporting employees can take many forms, and as you get to know the employees under your leadership, the ideal ways to communicate and help each individual will reveal themselves.⁵ The following tips should give you some ideas to get you started on becoming a more empathetically supportive leader:

- Listen to your employee's needs
- Be aware of signs of burnout
- Demonstrate a willingness to help employees with challenging tasks or when they have concerns over internal operations
- Show sincere interest in the fears, hopes and goals of others in the workplace
- Show genuine compassion when a team member is grieving

It is important to remember that showing empathy in this way is not a sign of weakness, and it shouldn't distract from the needs of the company at large. On the contrary, studies show that supporting employees with empathetic actions create better morale, more helpful team members, and mutual trust between employees and their managers and executive leaders.⁶

Developing a positive relationship with employees

Listening to the needs of employees and acting in their best interest is one of the easiest ways to develop a positive relationship without crossing the boundaries of the employee-manager relationship. Yet, that's not the only way to establish such a bond.⁷ Here are a few more ways that strong, empathetic leaders start and maintain positive relationships with employees to help them thrive and progress in their respective roles:

- Talk about empathy openly and be a role model
- Learn the communication styles of each individual (DISC assessment, for instance) and use clear communication in a manner that suits that individual
- Give feedback at regular intervals — don't base feedback solely on accomplishments and failures
- Use regular check-ins to show employees that you are thinking about their progress and success⁸
- Use active listening to develop rapport and trust when talking about challenging issues
- Encourage employees to approach you when they face challenges —structure your conversations such that they are comfortable and welcoming, not stiff, negative and unpleasant, or you may find employees will withhold information to avoid harsh confrontations⁹



How to ensure your employees are on the right track to success

Building a positive and empathetic relationship with employees has many benefits to the individuals within the company and the company as a whole. Still, one of the most significant ways to maintain this trajectory is to make sure employees are on the right track to reach their individual goals.¹⁰ Everyone will have their own measure of success, dreams, and objectives, and thus they will have different milestones on the way to achieving those goals. Here are some ways to keep employees moving forward towards those goals:

- Always be listening
- When conducting regular check-ins, make sure to focus on the individual employee's goals, upcoming milestones to achieve that goal, and challenges they are currently facing
- Invest in career guidance help or life coaching for your team members

Encouraging employee growth and development

Thus far, we have established in this article that leading with empathy involves understanding the unique needs and goals of each team member and how this contributes to increased performance and employee satisfaction. However, there's one more thing that completes the circuit of supporting employees through their successes, and it's something that will help show others in the company that their growth and development matter.

Team members who see that their manager recognizes them tend to be more engaged and willing to go the extra mile. This can be established in many ways, through investing in


programs to help them develop the skills they wish to hone and by celebrating the milestones they do reach.

Investing in an individual employee's development, primarily when it centres around their own professional goals, shows that they are worth investing in and that their managers recognize that they fit in the company's bigger picture. The benefit to the company includes having more skilled workers who feel a sense of value and trust toward the company and its management teams. Beyond that, celebrating an individual's accomplishments as a team shows them and others that goal setting and attaining is worth celebrating.

Remember that empathy is all about connecting with others authentically—caring about their well-being and acting with compassion. The skill is as critical to our personal lives as it is in business, and it is a sign of strength and humanity that helps us all get along, work more effectively, and thrive as autonomous individuals. In business and beyond, having more empathetic and supportive leaders is vital to sustained overall well-being.

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