



Vitality

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



Empathic Leadership in Action: Strengthening trust through vulnerability

Leadership involves more than setting direction or meeting performance targets. It also means showing up as a human being, especially when your team needs connection, clarity, or support. In today's workplaces, where expectations are high and challenges are complex, leaders who lead with empathy and openness are often the ones who earn lasting trust.

This article explores the value of empathic leadership, the strength found in vulnerability, and practical strategies to foster a workplace where people feel seen, supported, and motivated to bring their best.

Redefining Leadership Through Empathy

Empathic leadership begins with a simple yet powerful premise: **understanding and relating to the emotional experiences of others.** It's about recognizing that employees are people first—individuals who bring with them their hopes, concerns, stressors, and identities to work each day. This approach invites leaders to

slow down, listen deeply, and respond with compassion. It asks them to see beyond tasks and deliverables, and instead focus on people's well-being, resilience, and potential.

To be a good leader, you don't need to have all the answers, you need to be present. Leaders who choose to understand rather than assume, and who ask rather than instruct, set the tone for a workplace culture built on respect and mutual care.

The Strength of Vulnerability

For many, vulnerability still may feel like a risk. There's a lingering fear that showing uncertainty or acknowledging struggle might be perceived as weakness. However, when leaders are open about challenges or limitations, it often creates space for trust, connection, and collaboration.

Leaders who admit when they've made a mistake, ask for feedback, or openly share that they don't have all the answers are sending

a powerful message: **"I trust you enough to be real with you."** This act of openness helps humanize leadership and invites trust in return.

Take, for example, a department head who shares how a difficult year impacted their focus, but also what they learned through it. Or a manager who acknowledges their limitations around a DEI topic and invites their team to learn alongside them. These moments may feel small, but they often create a ripple effect, increasing a sense of safety, morale, and loyalty within the team.

Open Communication Builds Lasting Trust

Empathy and vulnerability find their greatest impact when paired with open communication. When employees feel heard and understood, engagement and trust tend to follow. That means creating space for dialogue, not just monologue. Some ways to support open communication include:

- Holding regular feedback sessions that are two-way
- Inviting input on key decisions or processes
- Following up on concerns that have been raised
- Clarifying that no topic is too small when it comes to employee well-being
- Promoting a Supportive and Compassionate Workplace

A team will only be as open as they feel safe to be. That's why encouraging a culture of support is central to empathic leadership. Leaders play an essential role in creating the conditions that allow others to show up authentically and take healthy risks.

This includes:

- Promoting access to mental health support, including EFAP resources
- Normalizing conversations around stress, burnout, and emotional well-being
- Encouraging breaks, flexible hours, and boundaries that support work-life balance
- Offering support when team members are going through personal difficulties

Simple acts, like checking in after a bereavement, recognizing someone's efforts during a hard week, or encouraging someone to take care of themselves, can have a lasting impact. What matters most is that employees feel supported and know they won't face judgment for being human.

Leading by Example

Empathy is a daily practice. One of the most powerful ways to build an empathic culture is to model the behaviours you hope to see. This includes being emotionally available, acknowledging when you need support, and showing that it's okay to slow down and reflect when needed. Encouraging your team to do the same—through your own example—can help normalize these practices across the workplace.

A good starting point is active listening. When someone is speaking, set aside distractions and allow them to finish their thoughts. Reflect back what you've heard to confirm your understanding. These simple moments of focused attention can go a long way in building meaningful connection.

It also means showing respect for different lived experiences and communication styles. Empathic leaders recognize that background, culture, and personal challenges all shape how people show up at work. By asking thoughtful questions, staying curious, and holding space for diverse perspectives, leaders help foster trust and inclusion.

Finally, self-care is a leadership responsibility. Taking breaks, setting boundaries, delegating when needed, or seeking support are not indulgences; they're essential to sustaining your ability to lead effectively over time.

Building Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, involves the ability to recognize and manage your own emotions, as well as those of others. It includes self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills – all of which are equally important for responding thoughtfully in high-stakes situations.

As a leader, here are a few ways you can grow your EQ:

- Reflecting on what triggers strong emotional responses
- Practicing mindfulness (like breathing techniques, meditation, or journaling) or other grounding techniques
- Participating in leadership coaching or EQ-focused training
- Seeking regular feedback on how you are perceived as a leader

By focusing on improving your EQ and encouraging your team to do the same, you can enhance team dynamics, conflict resolution, and job satisfaction across your organization.

Balancing Openness with Professional Boundaries

As valuable as vulnerability can be, leaders also need to understand where to draw the line. It's not about sharing every personal detail or blurring roles, but rather about choosing when openness serves the team and when privacy is more appropriate.

A helpful guideline is to ask: **"Does this support connection or does it place a burden on the team?"** Leaders should remain approachable but not rely on team members for emotional support. Similarly, sharing emotions is healthy, but it must be done with intention and awareness of impact.

At the same time, leaders have an ethical responsibility to promote environments where a sense of psychological safety is the norm. That means addressing harmful behaviour, challenging stigma, and making sure no one is made to feel "lesser" for expressing a need or raising a concern.

Reflect, Reconnect, Reimagine Your Leadership

By embracing vulnerability, listening with curiosity, and leading with compassion, you create a workplace where people can thrive and where leadership is felt as much as it is seen.

Ask yourself:

- Where in your leadership have you held back from being vulnerable?
- What might shift if you chose to lead with empathy more intentionally?
- What support do you need to begin this work or to continue it more confidently?

If you're looking to grow in this area, Homewood Health can support your journey. Our Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) offers expert guidance, coaching, tools, and resources to help leaders deepen emotional intelligence, navigate difficult conversations, and foster healthy workplace relationships. Reach out today to learn how we can help you lead with greater empathy, resilience, and care.

References:

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