

5 Ways to Become a More Empathetic Leader

By Dan McCarthy

May 7, 2014

Empathy among managers is in short supply, according to [a survey](#) of more than 600 employees by talent mobility consulting firm Lee Hecht Harrison. The survey found that 58 percent of managers fail to show the right level of understanding toward their employees.

“Empathy isn’t a weakness, but fundamental to good management,” says Kristen Leverone, senior vice president for Lee Hecht Harrison’s Global Talent Development Practice. “It means being able to understand and relate to others’ feelings. After all, if a supervisor or manager can’t tune into the feelings of employees, it’s going to be very difficult to motivate or engage them. The survey seems to have struck a chord, and the findings should raise concerns for management.”

What is empathy? It’s an understanding of someone else’s world, and showing the person that you understand.

Empathy is not agreement—and it’s not sympathy (“oh, you poor thing”)—it’s simply understanding something from the other person’s perspective.

So how can you be a more empathetic leader? Here are five ways:

- 1. Get to know your employees.** How well do you really know your employees? Try this test: Take out a piece of paper, and for each employee, see if you can name their spouse or significant other, names of their kids, where they live, where they went to college and where their parents live. If you came up with a lot of blanks, I’d recommend spending a little more time in your one-on-ones asking and sharing before you jump right into status reports. It’s how relationships and trust are built, and demonstrates that you are interested and care.
- 2. One-on-ones?** You are having [regular one-one-ones](#) with each of your employees, aren’t you? If you’re not, it’s kind of hard to be empathetic if you don’t have a clue what your employees are doing.
- 3. Show interest in your employee’s day-to-day work.** A lot of managers like to think of themselves as big-picture managers, with little interest in knowing the gory details of every aspect of their employee’s jobs. While no employee wants to be micromanaged, employees do appreciate it when their managers show an interest and appreciation for what they do. Who knows, you might even learn something.
- 4. Listen—and respond with empathy.** Responding with empathy means letting your employee know you heard and understood both what they said as well as how they feel. It’s harder than it sounds, and it will take some practice, but people will appreciate even the clumsiest of efforts.

Example: “So Jane, let me see if I understand: You’ve been frustrated at the lack of support that you are getting from IT? Is that it?” Listening not only shows people you care, and that you “get it,” it also often allows

people to solve their own problems, just from being able to talk it out with someone.

5. Lend a hand. Lending a hand, removing roadblocks, providing support and/or resources—that’s what managers are supposed to do, right? When someone is having a problem, they are stuck, or just can’t figure it out on their own, saying “figure it out, that’s what you’re paid to do” isn’t very empathetic. You may not come right out and say that, but you may be coming across that way.

I had the opportunity to listen to a CEO talk about his company culture at a presentation recently. He took a lot of pride in making sure he knew every employee’s name (about 300), and liked to wander around chatting with each of them, asking about their jobs, their families, etc.

During one of these chats, one of his plant managers let him know that his son had been recently arrested—he made a stupid mistake. Needless to say, this was weighing heavily on the manager’s mind. The CEO asked him if he had an attorney, and he didn’t. That day, the CEO found an attorney for him and paid for it. It turns out the CEO had a similar experience with his own son.

While this may be an extreme example of empathy and lending a hand, can you imagine the impact that gesture had on that plant manager’s commitment to his company and his motivation? Priceless.

Dan McCarthy is director of executive development programs at the University of New Hampshire and writes the [Great Leadership](#) blog. He’s a regular contributor to [SmartBrief](#) and a member of the SmartBrief on Workforce Advisory Board.

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