



Interpersonal Communication

# Empathy Is a Non-Negotiable Leadership Skill. Here's How to Practice It.

by Palena Neale

April 30, 2025



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**Summary.** When leaders have misconceptions of what empathy entails, they don't know how to practice it—or they practice it badly. Many don't bother to intentionally lead with empathy at all, and the stakes are high for those who don't: low... [more](#)

I recently developed a leadership communication seminar for a large global organization. Upon seeing that my draft program included a session on empathy, the CEO reacted, “Oh, God! We all know empathy’s good, but doing all that touchy-feely stuff feels off!”

Leaders often overestimate how good they are at being empathetic. Per the [2024 State of Workplace Empathy Report: A Game Plan](#), “55% of CEOs think they lead [with] empathy at work, but only 28% of employees and 22% of HR share that view.” During another leadership workshop, one participant said: “I don’t feel comfortable listening to people’s feelings like a therapist. I’ve tried it with my staff; I don’t feel authentic, and it didn’t come across well.”

Empathy is a non-negotiable for leaders, and the stakes are high for a leader who fails to embrace and model it. Dismissing empathy can result in [negative consequences](#), including a toxic workplace, low morale, poor retention, and [burnout](#). [For leaders](#), it can result in failure to connect, inability to gather information, or being perceived as inaccessible. For my participant who struggled to demonstrate empathy, his 360 feedback revealed his leadership style was “too brusque” bordering on “aggressive,” which explained in part why his staff were reluctant to share information and ideas with him.

Choosing to bypass empathy can feel like an efficient shortcut, but when it comes to navigating problems and building engagement, research tells us that empathy is essential to effective connection, communication, and collaboration in the workplace. A recent [systematic literature review](#) of 42 empirical studies found that organizations with empathetic leaders displayed increased employee engagement and a reduction in staff turnover. Particularly in times of [uncertainty and crisis](#), empathy is proven to be crucial for leading and safeguarding organizations out of them.

Despite this, leaders still struggle to understand what empathy is (and isn't) and how to practice it. Furthermore, many people may be resistant to showing empathy, especially when cultural or gender stereotypes come into play. Male leaders may be concerned that empathy isn't perceived as masculine; female leaders may worry about being seen as too emotional or not results-oriented enough, therefore suppressing empathy; some neurodivergent people find empathy tricky; others find the process too energy-consuming.

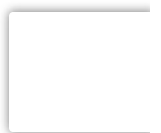
Leadership is about achieving results through other people, and empathy is a requisite to mobilize, connect with, and engage others. Here are six strategies leaders can use to get empathy right at work.

### **Develop an empathy protocol.**

Without a clear definition, empathy could mean anything (or nothing), which influences how a leader practices it (or doesn't). My CEO client and his leadership team valued empathy in principle, but viewing it as “indulgence” or “therapy” made them wary in practice.

Create a shared understanding of empathy for your organization or team—what it is, how it adds value, and how it will be behaviorally expressed in your environment.

- **Discuss what empathy means in your particular context and how it can support the culture you're creating.** One tech organization I worked with defined empathy as “intellectual generosity” or the pursuit of technical excellence through dissent and debate.
- **Identify how empathy will be expressed in behavior.** The tech team highlighted truth-telling, deep and generous



listening, perspective-taking, embracing complexity, and (respectful) disagreement as important empathetic behaviors.

- **Define how empathy, performance standards, and accountability work together.** The tech team outlined how they would consider an individual's circumstances and provide or find support while also making sure the team's needs are met.
- **Commit to empathy for one another.** What can your team count on you for? How will you know it's happening? My CEO client committed to a more nuanced view of empathy that was "curious and rigorous."

### **Be other-focused.**

Many of us have experienced a leader (or conversational partner) who engages with a concern by anchoring it in their own experience.

This happened to a client of mine, Allana (all names have been changed), who attempted to share with her boss how difficult she found it to keep a lot of data in her head while experiencing "menopause memory." She wanted to provide context for why she was taking longer to process certain information. Her boss spent the next 45 minutes discussing her own journey through menopause, which was entirely different from Allana's.

This kind of reaction often doesn't land the way we mean it to. Allana was frustrated. This is where empathy in action is more about being instead of doing.

- **Be a container.** Although Allana's boss created space for discussion, she also filled that space. Instead, be a container of time, space, and listening for someone to share their truth in



safety and to recognize, articulate, and process their experience without judgment. Allow them to fill the container themselves.

- **Be a listener.** Listening is a gift we give and receive—a way to make people feel seen and heard. If we cannot listen, we can't extend empathy. Set an intention: "I am going to be attentive and present and will listen without judgement." Determine what you need to do to be attentive and present.
- **Be a questioner.** Empathetic leaders demonstrate interest in others and ask questions. Open-ended perspective-seeking questions facilitate our thinking and enhance mutual understanding. For example: What's this experience been like for you? How have you been managing this? What works? What doesn't?

Extending empathy requires an other-focus: making and holding space for others, being present, still, and curious.

### **Balance individual and group needs.**

When leaders focus too much on individuals' emotional experiences, they risk dropping the ball when it comes to broader organizational issues, like team performance and strategic decision-making.

Nathalia, a senior partner in a law firm, wanted to be there for her colleague Mia, but her over-identification with Mia's feelings led her to over-effort in implementing solutions. She inadvertently stopped directing the team, causing resentment, confusion, and accusations of favoritism, ultimately requiring repair.

To avoid getting hooked in an emotion and investing your resources on the individual to the exclusion of the team, try the following:



- **Connect to various perspectives to gather information.**

Perspective-taking is about gathering information to understand what is true for someone *without* feeling their feelings. It helps surface what is important to them, such as values, objectives, and agenda, makes it easier to signpost solutions, and shows you've taken time to understand their perspective, even if you don't agree or feel the way they do. Nathalia could have identified what she wanted to learn about Mia's and the team's viewpoints by saying, "Tell me where you're coming from," or "I really want to understand your perspective on this." This allows you to gather important information instead of staying stuck in big emotions.

- **Call on your empathy protocol.** Discuss with your colleague or team—while maintaining the individual's confidentiality—how you can use your empathy protocol to provide support. From the outset, raise awareness of how an issue might affect them, then get their input to co-create solutions. Everyone faces unique challenges, so you might modify accountability measures—like deadlines, performance targets, or resource allocation—to fit individual circumstances. Can the individual be supported in other ways (flexible hours, coaching, etc.) while still making progress on team goals? Can you temporarily adjust workloads? Can other team members pitch in without burning out? Importantly, consider how such changes affect the rest of the team.

Demonstrating empathy as a leader does not mean you have to feel others' emotions, but better understand what is happening with them, gathering important information for individual *and* collective decisions, so both can succeed.

**Facilitate support instead of taking over.**



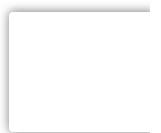
If someone is struggling, it's tempting to try to solve their problems. Nathalia felt enmeshed in Mia's problem with a difficult member of staff (who had reported Mia to HR), so Nathalia zealously confronted the person, HR, and other staff. Nathalia neither asked Mia what support she wanted, nor was able to focus on what she or her team needed after this emotional intervention.

A hindsight exercise reviewed how Nathalia could have supported Mia by identifying *together* what she needed and then facilitating access to this support. Next time an employee needs support, ask:

- **What's going on?** Find out the full facts.
- **What support is needed—by them, the team, you?** Self-regulating your own emotions and asking what might help is more empathic and efficient than deciding yourself.
- **Who can provide support?** Once you have heard what they need, you can facilitate, rather than provide, the support (where appropriate). Nathalia's colleague needed some emotional help as well as HR support and mediation.
- **How can I facilitate that support?** Often, the most important support we can provide is by listening and asking what is true for the other person and what they need. This holds space for them to be seen and heard and provides important information for next steps to access that support.

### **Model boundary-setting.**

Leaders face endless demands requiring empathy: building partnerships, supporting staff health, demonstrating sensitivity and compassion, inspiring and motivating, creating growth, and more. Heavy investment in others' emotions can result in





overwhelm, burnout, impaired decision-making, reduced effectiveness, or even what research calls *empathic distress*: “the desire to withdraw from a situation in order to protect oneself from excessive negative feelings.”

Leaders are also expected to display a combination of vulnerability and courage. Out of balance, this can mean revealing too much about personal struggles or emotions, blurring professional boundaries, and muddying the perception of the leader as a reliable authority figure. One of my clients, Kris, a tech VP, didn’t know how to balance being an “accessible” and “empathic” leader with what he needed: focus time. He was always available and became exhausted from not protecting his time or energy. We identified some simple fixes: Scheduling uninterrupted time, working from home on certain days, and delegating meetings allowed him to remain accessible and empathic while securing his needs.

Healthy boundary-setting is often hindered by guilt, people-pleasing, or fear of conflict, leading to overcommitment and unclear personal limits. So:

- **Know your limits and protect your energy.** Consider:
  - What three boundaries do you want or need right now?
  - Why are these important for you?
  - Identify what you need to put in place.
- **Model balance and boundaries.** If you struggle with keeping boundaries for yourself, think about what you are modeling for others, like your family or community.





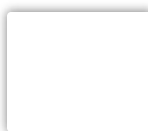
- Demonstrate vulnerability and bravery without oversharing or emotional dumping. From personal experience, offer lessons about overcoming challenges or managing stress to your team.
- Model healthy behaviors: work-life balance, self-care, taking breaks, vacations, digital detoxes, emotion regulation, and stress management. Encourage others to do the same, creating a culture of well-being.
- Manage relationships, poor performance, and interpersonal conflicts promptly to reduce escalation and greater investment.

### **Update your language to connect.**

When someone talks about their feelings or experiences, especially if they are negative, it's tempting to try to make things better by using phrases like: "I know exactly how you feel," "It'll all be okay," or "You're going to be fine." The trouble is we cannot know exactly how someone else feels or accurately predict that things will be okay.

Another well-meaning response to avoid starts with "At least." I had a client who expressed, "I'm terrified about giving this presentation in Spanish," and their manager responded, "At least *you*'ve got basic Spanish!"

People who say this usually want to help the other person feel better. But it can come off as patronizing, minimizing the other person's experience or feelings and making them feel belittled, misunderstood, or not seen. For my client delivering his first presentation in Spanish, he said that the at-leastling stung and "shut me down from expressing how terrified I felt. My boss



pulled the rug from under me, suggesting I had no right to feel that way, implying that her situation was much worse.”

Instead:

- **Validate and explore.** Listen to others’ experiences and feelings without judging or invalidating them with “that’s nothing!” or at-leasting. Instead, validate: “It sounds like you’re feeling frustrated about not getting that promotion” or “I’m sorry you’re feeling so anxious about this presentation.”  
Witnessing without judgement is support in itself.
- **Build connection.** Replace dismissive but well-intentioned phrases with language that builds connection: “I hear how anxious you are about giving this presentation. I get that.”  
“Seems like you’re feeling disappointed about not getting that promotion. Tell me more.” “I’m here if you’d like to talk.” And when you feel out of your depth, take a page from [Brené Brown](#), who suggests: “I don’t even know what to say to you, but I’m so glad you shared that.”
- **Take an interested perspective.** Be open and interested to discover what someone’s’ truth looks and sounds like. One challenge in practicing empathy is believing someone’s perspective when it doesn’t match your own. Your ability to hold truth for you *and* the other person is empathy in action.

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Empathy, particularly when focused on perspective-taking, is an important component of effective leadership, and like any other skill, it requires practice. Of course, there may be people or contexts for which empathy can backfire, which is why it’s



important to start with an understanding of what empathy is and what it looks like in your particular workplace. Appreciating empathy is not enough: Empathy in action is practiced through the questions we ask, the listening we do, and the quality of attention we give in elevating people and performance. It's a non-negotiable.

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