

Being empathetic, even when work needs to get done



Everyone has experienced this. Tasks are piling up and a key individual on the job is experiencing personal problems that are affecting their ability to perform. As much as leaders would like people to leave home issues at home, this is not always realistic. A leader may ask, why is empathy such a big deal? Here are some statistics to illustrate its importance:

The 2018 Businessolver Workplace Empathy Monitor study, in America, found:

- 92% of employees and 98% of HR professionals say an empathetic employer drives retention;
- 75% of all respondents would leave their organisation if it became less empathetic;
- Nearly 80% of employees would be willing to work longer hours for an employer they perceived as empathetic; and

- 60% of employees would actually take a pay cut to work for a more empathetic employer.

In 2015, Amazon came under scrutiny due to an article in the New York Times, describing the harsh management practices. Following this article, Amazon's founder and chief executive, Jeff Bezos wrote a memo to Amazon employees saying, "our tolerance for any such lack of empathy needs to be zero."

A problem surrounding this topic is the misunderstanding of what empathy actually is. It is often confused with rooting for the underdog, supporting and sympathising with the downtrodden, being sensitive, nice, tolerant and feeling sorry for others. This makes empathy sound like a soft skill. Empathy and sympathy are not synonymous, but they are related.

Empathy, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation."

There are two types of empathy:

- Cognitive Empathy: The ability to understand another person's perspective (perspective-taking); and
- Emotional Empathy: The ability to feel what someone else feels.

While emotional empathy is automatic, cognitive empathy is deliberate and can be learnt. Cognitive empathy is a skill and not a personality trait. Just like any other skill, in order to improve, it has to be practiced.

This does not mean, that whenever a leader is presented with somebody's personal problems, they must give them time off to sort out their problems. If you are a manager, the next time an employee comes to you with a problem or complaint, resist the "Not again. What now?" attitude:

- Try to remember how you felt in a similar situation;
- Actively listen to what they are saying, not in order to reply, but in order to understand;
- Acknowledge the person's situation. This does not mean you have to agree with it; and
- Where possible, try to be flexible and provide support.

Being more empathetic shows that a leader appreciates the contributions made by their employees and that they are more than just money-making agents.

References

Bell, K. (2009). Empathy: Not Such a Soft Skill. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2009/05/empathy-not-such-a-soft-skill>.

Cambridge Dictionary (2018). *Empathy*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>.

Kantor, J., & Streitfeld, D. (2015). Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>.

Knight, R. (2018). How to Develop Empathy for Someone Who Annoys You. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2018/04/how-to-develop-empathy-for-someone-who-annoys-you>.

Shanahan, R. (2018). *2018 State of Workplace Empathy*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessolver.com/empathy>.

Wilson, E.J. (2015). Empathy Is Still Lacking in the Leaders Who Need It Most. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2015/09/empathy-is-still-lacking-in-the-leaders-who-need-it-most>.