



The Empathetic Leader

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THE *empathetic leader*



BY SARAH ROMNEY

Responsible. Authentic. Driven.

These are the top three qualities that undergraduate business students identified as being important traits in a great leader. In a study conducted by Svetlana Holt and Joan Marques from Woodbury University, students in five business classes at Woodbury were asked to list qualities that they thought would be essential for a leader to be effective. Of the ten most common traits, “empathy” was consistently rated the lowest (Holt).

Why was empathy always rated lower than the others? Attempting to answer this question, Marques and Holt surveyed MBA students at the same school on why they think this occurred. The most common results were summarized into two themes that describe why earlier respondents rated empathy so low (Holt):

- 1.** RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THAT EMPATHY IS INAPPROPRIATE IN BUSINESS SETTINGS.
- 2.** RESPONDENTS HAVE A LACK OF FAMILIARITY WITH EMPATHY.

The fact is not that empathy is an unimportant quality in a business leader. In reality, it is quite the opposite. But unfortunately, business students lack an understanding of what empathy is and why it is important for a leader to be effective. There is also a perception of leadership in our society that makes us think that business leaders are not, and should not, be empathetic. We must change this mindset.

WHAT IS EMPATHY?

Before relating empathy to business leadership, it is necessary to understand what empathy is. Marques and Holt define it as the “ability to understand the feelings transmitted through verbal and nonverbal messages, to provide emotional support to people when needed, and to understand the links between others’ emotions and behavior” (Holt). Essentially, empathy is being able to recognize and understand how people are feeling.

It is important to note that there are two distinct kinds of empathy, and both are important for effective leadership. These are **cognitive** empathy and **affective** empathy. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to *perceive* what others are feeling. Affective empathy is being able to *feel* what others are feeling. These are not necessarily experienced together, but the ability to recognize others’ feelings helps leaders to act accordingly and the ability to feel what they are feeling helps leaders to connect to the person and have the desire to help them (Humphrey).

WHAT DO THE STUDIES SHOW?

Multiple studies have resulted in a positive correlation between leadership and empathy skills. One study reported a correlation of .44 between the two, signifying that 20 percent of the variance in leadership scores may be due to empathetic ability (Bell).

Furthermore, another study focused on young, “gifted and talented” students and measured empathy in terms of ability to understand and serve others, develop others’ potential, leverage diversity, and be aware of political dynamics. Leadership was also measured in terms of self and people management skills. The testing resulted in high, statistically significant correlations between the empathy-related skills and the leadership abilities (Bakar).

WHY DO LEADERS NEED EMPATHY?

Empathy is valuable in all social interactions and relationships, but here are a few key reasons why it is especially important for business leaders.

Resolve group needs. One of the roles of a leader is to focus on and resolve the needs of a group. Empathy enables leaders to recognize what those needs are and perceive the needs of individual group members (Bell).

Obtain followers. No one is a leader without followers. In the Gallup-created book *Strength Based Leadership*, researchers found four key traits that explain why people follow. One of these is compassion. As the book explains, “most leaders are hesitant to show genuine compassion for the people they lead . . . but the results of our studies suggest that it might be wise for these leaders to take a lesson from great managers, who clearly *do* care about each of their employees” (Rath).

Be a hero. Many great leaders are known for the risks and sacrifices that they make on behalf of others. Empathy contributes to a leader’s ability to perform such heroic acts, or any prosocial behavior (a behavior that benefits others). This is because leaders are better able to recognize when people are in distress and need help (Humphrey). Even in business settings, leaders must take risks and make sacrifices to accomplish something that benefits the organization.

Get positive results. Followers react well when they can feel that their leaders care. Having an empathetic leader motivates people to trust in, identify with, and bond with their leader. These feelings also satisfy peoples’ need for affiliation and leads to a collective identity, group cohesiveness, and organizational citizenship behavior (Choi). Studying teachers at a school, Yan Lussiez found that with an empathetic school principal, teachers were more likely to respond positively to the principal and give more effort toward their job (Lussiez). To get the best results out of individuals and teams, leaders must show empathy.



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These four abilities, along with other essential roles of leaders, are positively influenced by the empathy that leaders demonstrate.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

With a better understanding of what empathy is and how it relates to leadership, it may not be hard to accept the idea that empathy is important. However, there are still many narcissistic leaders in the world and many students with the mindset that empathy does not relate to business leadership.

Business programs may focus too much on hard social skills to prepare students to be leaders. Instead of learning to be self-focused, business students should focus on developing the soft, inter-human skills that are just as necessary as other skills (Holt). Empathy emerges in early childhood (Bakar), but can be developed throughout one’s life with continual effort (Holt). So let us put forth the effort necessary to develop the ability to be empathetic and make it known that this is one of the most important qualities that a leader can possess.

Notes

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