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A guide to **empathetic leadership**

Understanding and building empathy in the workplace

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Introduction

We all know of Steve Jobs, and have undoubtedly come across anecdotes about his authoritative approach to leadership.

Known for his pursuit of perfection and rigorous standards, the founder of Apple was portrayed as a stringent leader and a formidable presence in the workplace.

He wasn't known for being particularly friendly or polite, and his leadership approach faced criticism, ranging from controlling tendencies to his communication skills with both colleagues and employees.

However, we didn't really know him. Not like Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar Animation Studios, did.

Catmull worked for Jobs for 26 years and notes in his book, 'Creativity, Inc', that Jobs was a **"boorish, brilliant, but emotionally tone-deaf guy"** who **"changed into a different man during the last two decades of his life".**

Over this period, Catmull watched Jobs evolve from **"dismissive and brusque"** to a **"fairer and wiser", "empathetic"** leader with an enhanced **"understanding of partnership".**

Essentially, when Jobs was very publicly fired from Apple in 1985, this all-time low was a turning point, triggering him to grow into someone who practiced empathetic leadership.

By the time he returned to Apple in 1997, after his decade of "wandering in the wilderness", he was the transformational, yet more emotionally intelligent leader the company needed.

Jobs would agree. In his renowned Stanford commencement address he explains, "I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me," emphasizing that, "it was awful tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it".

> **"**
> Steve was a person who learned from his mistakes. It was the changed Steve who made Apple great, not the person in the movies and books.
>
> **Ed Catmull**

As Jobs' example demonstrates, empathetic leadership is a win-win situation on multiple fronts.

According to Businesssolver, **70% of employees believe that empathy in leadership results in reduced turnover rates.** Catalyst reports that **76% of individuals working under "highly empathetic senior leaders" frequently or consistently experience high engagement levels.**

Ultimately, empathetic leadership doesn't just increase morale and employee engagement, it also improves your bottom line.

The role of empathetic leadership in today's workplace

Business leaders face a plethora of challenges, such as inflation, market uncertainty, high employee turnover rates and persistent supply chain issues.

As the pressure intensifies to maintain workplace stability, empathy is emerging as a crucial leadership skill. The question arises: how can organizations cultivate resilient and compassionate workplaces?

Leaders are actively exploring the development of sustainable business models that prioritize employee needs while simultaneously advancing the company's overarching goals.

Empathy lies at the heart of the latest corporate trend, as companies strive to demonstrate genuine care for their employees.

Microsoft's CEO, Satya Nadella, echoed this sentiment in the organization's Work Trend Index Report, under-scoring a commitment to fostering an environment where employees can thrive.

While having increased empathy has certainly never hurt anyone, not having it has.

So, how do we increase empathy in the workplace and champion an empathetic and compassionate culture?

Understanding **empathy**

> " Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.
>
> **Simon Sinek** "

What is empathy?

To increase empathy, we need to look at what empathy really means.

At a basic level, empathy involves the capacity to connect with fellow human beings, employing emotional sensitivity to perceive the world from their perspective and authentically experience what they are feeling.

Often confused with sympathy – as Dr. Brené Brown emphasizes in her famous Ted Talk 'The Power of Vulnerability' 🡵 – it's important to differentiate them, as one connects and the other divides.

Sympathy peers down from above, setting a distance between you and the person you're sympathizing with, 'Oh no, poor you'. In contrast, empathy asks, 'How are you feeling?' without passing judgment.

Empathy doesn't revolve around problem-solving or offering unsolicited advice, nor does it involve sugar-coating or dismissing someone's issues with positive indifference, 'everything will be fine!'.

Sympathy sets you at a level above another person, whereas empathy climbs down to sit beside you.

Traditional hierarchal structures can make it difficult for leaders to climb down this proverbial ladder, but embodying empathetic leadership may involve stepping out of the roles of manager, director, or CEO for a moment.

To genuinely walk a mile in someone else's shoes, you have to kick off your 'I'm the one in charge' shoes; connect at an authentic level and see the world, really see it, through your team member's eyes.

Empathy allows leaders to connect with their team members and respond effectively to their needs by providing motivation, support and comfort in times of challenge.

Empathetic leaders
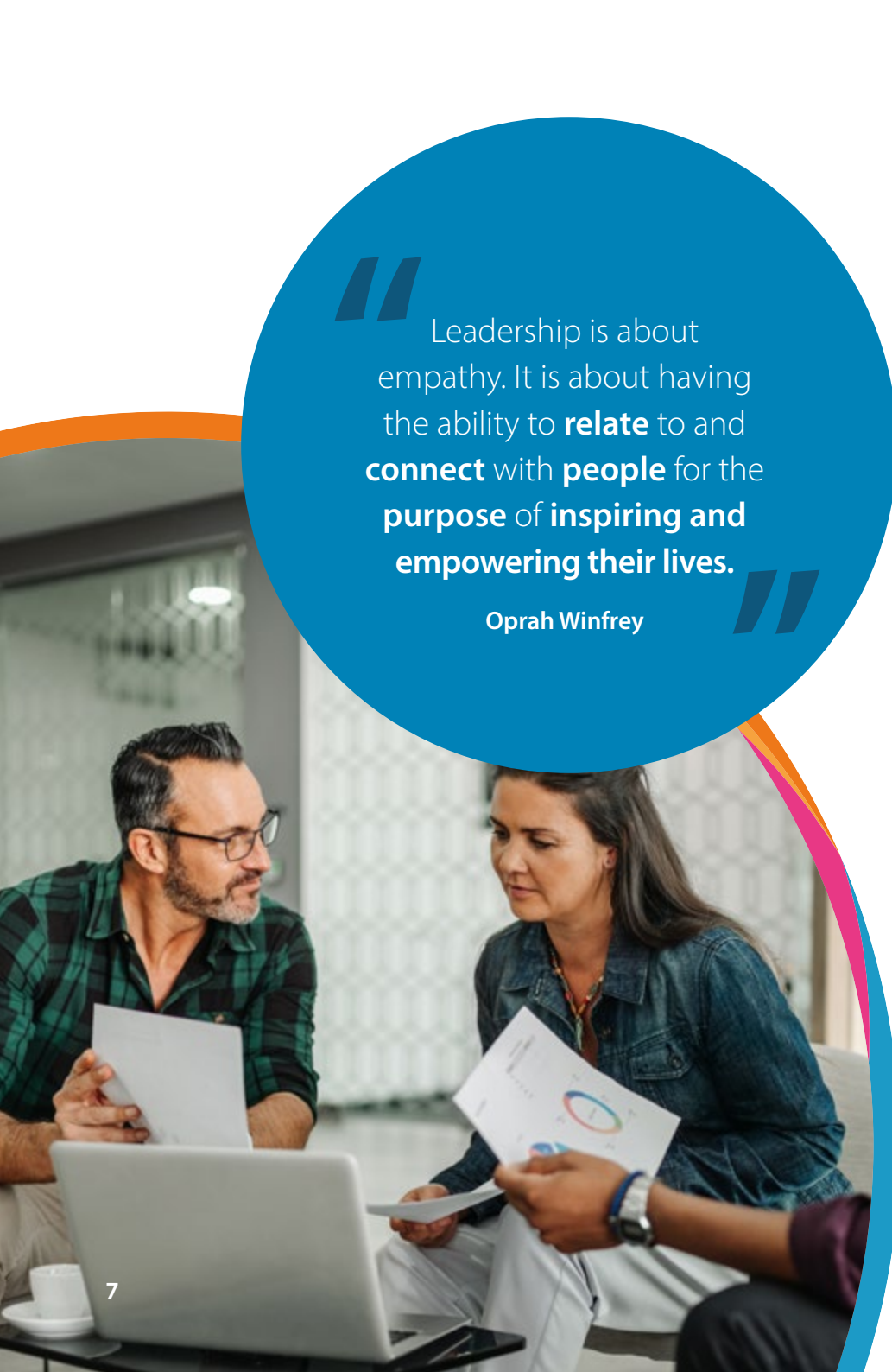
> Leadership is about empathy. It is about having the ability to **relate** to and **connect** with **people** for the **purpose** of **inspiring and empowering their lives.**
>
> **Oprah Winfrey**

Empathetic leadership ought to form the foundation of day-to-day operations, but many corporations still need to catch up.

Employee anxiety has reached its peak in recent years. Corporations are witnessing a bigger call to action: it's time for leaders to address the issues impacting organizational well-being.

Empathetic leadership is one of the best styles for enabling leaders to comprehend the thoughts, feelings and emotions of their team members.

While empathetic leaders may not be mental health counselors, they possess heightened emotional intelligence.

This fosters a sense of understanding and diminishes feelings of isolation when individuals face life's challenges. Empathy plays a pivotal role in this approach.

Aside from employee support, incorporating empathetic leadership into corporate culture can yield tangible benefits for both employees and the organization as a whole.

For example, organizations like Google tout the benefits of psychological safety- of which empathetic leadership is a key component- when it comes to supporting innovation and productivity.

This leadership style isn't just for periods of growth, transition and transformation.

The more urgent the needs of your business, the more critical it is to check in with your people. As former Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern said (and demonstrated) 'leaders can be both empathetic and strong'. In fact, empathy is strength. To be vulnerable takes bravery.

To be calm and compassionate while the world crumbles around you takes incredible resolve.

And it works.

From reviewing nearly **7,000 managers in 38 different countries,** the Center for Creative Leadership saw a direct link to managers' job performances. Leaders who were viewed as most compassionate by their co-workers were also rated the most high-performing by their bosses.

> " Empathy is being concerned about the human being, rather than their output. "
>
> **Simon Sinek**

The traits of empathetic leadership

Empathetic leadership sees the individual within the collaborative.

Leaders who empathize know that invisible struggles exist and seek ways to understand them. More importantly, they communicate those intentions effectively.

Leaders who lead with empathy embody a variety of traits including:

1 **Self-awareness:** Leaders who practice empathy guide their teams and organizations with a focus on support and growth.

2 **Flexibility:** Empathetic leaders demonstrate flexibility and adaptability, tailoring their leadership style to the situation and meeting the specific needs of their team.

3 **Compassion:** Leaders must authentically care about and show genuine concern for the well-being of their team members, while also comprehending their emotions and circumstances.

4 **Emotional intelligence:** Empathetic leaders possess high levels of emotional intelligence; adeptly comprehending and handling not only their own emotions but also those of their teams.

5 **Approachability:** Empathetic leaders are accessible and approachable, offering guidance and motivation to enhance the performance of their teams.

6 **Active listening:** Rather than just listening to what is said, leaders interpret the meanings of words used and the underlying needs of the speaker. They fully immerse themselves in the conversation, aiming to comprehend rather than simply respond.

7 **Authenticity:** Empathetic leaders are true to themselves in their interactions with others. Their outward expressions align with their internal values, and they demonstrate honesty when confronted with challenges lacking immediate solutions.

8 **Perspective awareness:** Empathetic leaders examine situations from various perspectives, striving to approach circumstances objectively and delve into the core issues to construct a more authentic understanding.

Remember…

In the workplace, if leaders are too directly involved in the emotions of a team member, they can become overwhelmed, leading to 'empathy distress' and, in some cases, burnout.

Empathy is not free from bias. Neuroscientists emphasize that we subconsciously feel for people who are most like us. Therefore, keeping a sense of perspective is crucial to empathy's success in the workplace, and seeking to understand every point of view without becoming attached or overwhelmed.

Building **empathy** in the workplace

> **"** People will try and convince you that you should keep your empathy out of your career. **Don't accept this false premise. "**
>
> **Tim Cook**

Weaving empathy into core business values

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Stanford University psychology professor Jamil Zaki [↗] explains that "empathy is contagious: people 'catch' each other's care and altruism".

To truly weave empathy into your core business values, leaders need to model it.

If a leader is constantly overlooking their employees' concerns and communicating with them in a rude manner, it should not come as a surprise if these behaviors start to permeate the culture at your company. Effective communication with team members should be conducted with empathy.

Empathy breeds inclusivity

Adopting empathetic leadership opens the workspace to new thoughts and perspectives.

The 'we' mentality of leadership invites new ideas and solutions, while the 'me' mentality closes off innovation.

Leaders who practice empathy are inclined to see diversity and inclusion as integral to their business' success. In inclusion-focused workplaces, talent acquisition, retention, performance, innovation and increased employee engagement become more achievable.

This is all the more important when we consider the value of diversity of thought: empowering people to bring their true self and their ideas to work.

According to Korn/Ferry research, diverse teams solve problems faster than teams of cognitively similar people; with inclusive teams making better decisions up to 87% of the time. For this diversity to work, however, leaders must use the power of empathy to create an environment that's genuinely inclusive.

It's up to leaders to build inclusivity into the fabric of their teams and wider organization.

> **"** Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower. **"**
>
> **Steve Jobs**

Empathy lessens reactivity

For many, the instinct is to point fingers when something goes wrong.

But instead of jumping to conclusions and scolding an employee, get behind the why.

While being stern and assertive may yield quick results and establish dominance, a reactive leader causes unnecessary anxiety and stress among employees, which can prove detrimental to the company.

In their annual report, CIPD found that 76% of respondents report some stress-related absence with 'heavy workloads and management style most commonly to blame'. Similarly, The Anxiety and Depression Association of America's study on work-related stress found that 50% of respondents reported a link between workplace stress and performance, with management affecting their mental health.

Anyone who has had a job knows what bad management looks like.

That feeling of tension when an email pings through from a seemingly never-satisfied boss. Feeling constantly monitored or having every small task scrutinized. Having suggestions dismissed without consideration. The list goes on…

An after-hours email can derail an employee's evening or weekend, and leaders placing immediate blame puts employees on the defensive.

In contrast, an empathetic leader will check in on their employee and facilitate collaborative problem solving. Does the employee have all the necessary support? What is going on with an employee's life beyond the current project?

A good manager recognizes that the success of an employee reflects effective leadership.

Think of the Steve Jobs example here! Embrace your 'wander in the wilderness' and say no to autocratic, assertive leadership to make way for compassion and empathy…

> " People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. "
>
> **Maya Angelou**

Five ways to **nurture empathy** at work

When it comes to fostering an empathetic and compassionate workplace, adopting these core values will help leaders set positive examples for their teams.

1 Clearly communicate employee-centric values and expectations

When employees are aware of the organization's values, they can better align their personal values with those of the company. This alignment creates a sense of shared purpose, making it easier for people to connect on a deeper level.

Clearly communicated values contribute to the creation of an inclusive organizational culture. A shared set of values helps build a cohesive work environment where employees feel a sense of belonging, understanding and mutual respect.

Additionally, transparent communication around values and expectations fosters trust between leaders and employees. When individuals trust that their leaders are genuine and consistent in their approach, they are more likely to open up and share their perspectives.

A workplace that prioritizes and communicates employee-centric values is likely to place a higher emphasis on employee well-being. This, in turn, contributes to a more empathetic environment where leaders actively consider the needs and concerns of their team members.

When leaders consistently model empathetic behavior in line with stated values, employees are more likely to follow suit. Leaders who actively demonstrate empathy set a standard for others to emulate. It creates a foundation for empathy to thrive in the workplace, and fosters a positive and supportive work environment, interwoven by shared values.

2 Listen to employees' needs and follow up regularly

Moving toward an empathetic leadership style is not a single-step process. Instead, companies must take constant small steps to embrace an empathetic leadership style.

If leaders have learned anything over the last few years, it's that the world can change overnight, and needs will be re-evaluated.

Listening to employee's needs and following up regularly are instrumental in nurturing empathy and empathetic leadership within the workplace.

Company leadership should check in with employees on projects, overall job satisfaction and smaller elements of everyday work.

Actively listening to employees' needs conveys a genuine interest in their well-being and concerns. This sincerity helps build trust and contributes

to establishing a foundation for empathetic relationships between leaders and team members.

Following up on employees' needs demonstrates a commitment to addressing their concerns promptly. This proactive approach shows that leaders are not only listening, but also taking concrete steps to support their team members, fostering a sense of security and trust.

Regular follow-ups provide an opportunity to acknowledge and recognize individual contributions. Recognizing employees for their efforts and achievements reinforces the idea that each team member is valued.

3 Encourage upskilling and reskilling

If leaders have empathy for their employees, they understand that their team members have lives outside of the workplace and larger goals for their careers.

This recognition is critical to an empathetic leadership style because it helps leaders understand the goal of employee engagement initiatives: to support the employee individually, not just as a cog in the corporate wheel.

In short, to be truly empathetic, leaders should increase their awareness of future opportunities.

Awareness of future opportunities speaks to the idea that, when one has a deeper awareness of others, what they may be going through or dealing with at work and at home, one can more easily read between the lines and support people in a way that is meaningful to them in the long term, or suggest solutions that go beyond the initial issue being presented.

Activating awareness of future opportunities helps leaders to not discount new ideas and solutions because they feel they already know the answer. It reminds them that they know ONE answer, and they can hold space for others to emerge.

This is at the heart of upskilling and reskilling.

In today's business landscape, prioritizing upskilling and reskilling are essential for staying competitive. By focusing on this, leaders can ensure that their teams have the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in an ever-evolving environment, fostering the adaptability to look for new solutions.

Additionally, providing opportunities for upskilling and reskilling enables leaders to demonstrate a genuine investment in the well-being and future success of their team members. It promotes a culture of continuous learning for personal and professional growth, where employees feel valued and motivated to contribute their best.

4 Review and adjust processes on a regular basis

The most important element of an empathetic leadership style is an openness to review and adjust processes on a regular basis.

Empathetic leaders recognize that the needs and circumstances of individuals and teams can change over time. By demonstrating a willingness to adapt workflows based on feedback and changing circumstances, leaders show empathy by acknowledging and responding to the unique requirements of their team members.

Additionally, this enables leaders to address employee concerns directly.

Through regular review, leaders can identify and rectify any issues or bottlenecks that may be causing stress or hindering productivity. It also demonstrates a willingness to listen to employees, make necessary adjustments, and create conditions that foster efficient collaboration and productivity.

Empathetic leaders exhibit flexibility and openness to new ideas and approaches.

Regular process reviews demonstrate an inclination to adapt and consider alternative methods, contributing to a culture of psychological safety, where leaders are open to diverse perspectives and solutions.

This two-way communication similarly fosters a culture of openness and collaboration, where employees feel comfortable expressing their opinions and leaders actively seek to input to improve processes.

5 Enhance your awareness and appreciate preferences

Awareness **+** Empathy **=** Leadership Success

At the heart of empathetic leadership is awareness.

Leaders must possess a profound comprehension of themselves and their teams, which enables them to navigate intricate challenges with empathy and resilience.

Leaders who lack self-awareness and empathy often struggle to connect with their teams on a human level. This can cause low morale, decreased productivity and high turnover rates, affecting an organization's culture and bottom line.

On the other hand, leaders who understand their emotions, triggers and biases can make well-informed decisions and manage stress more effectively. This awareness allows them to respond flexibly and thoughtfully when workplace situations arise.

Enhanced awareness enables leaders to appreciate individual preferences. Empathetic leaders listen attentively to their team members, seeking to understand their perspectives, concerns, and preferences. This understanding enables them to vary their leadership type and communication styles to best suit individuals, as well as leverage strengths across the team to align with what works best for the team.

# How can you enhance your awareness?
Enter: Insights Discovery

Insights Discovery provides insights into individual preferences, communication styles, and behaviors. Leaders who use this learning journey gain a better understanding of the diverse ways in which team members approach work, make decisions and interact with others.

This understanding is foundational for empathetic leadership, as it helps leaders appreciate and respect individual differences.

It allows leaders to tailor their communication style to better resonate with the preferences of their team members, leverage strengths within a team for effective collaboration and recognize stress responses amongst team members.

Discovery Insights®

Find out more about how Insights Discovery can enhance your awareness **on our website.**
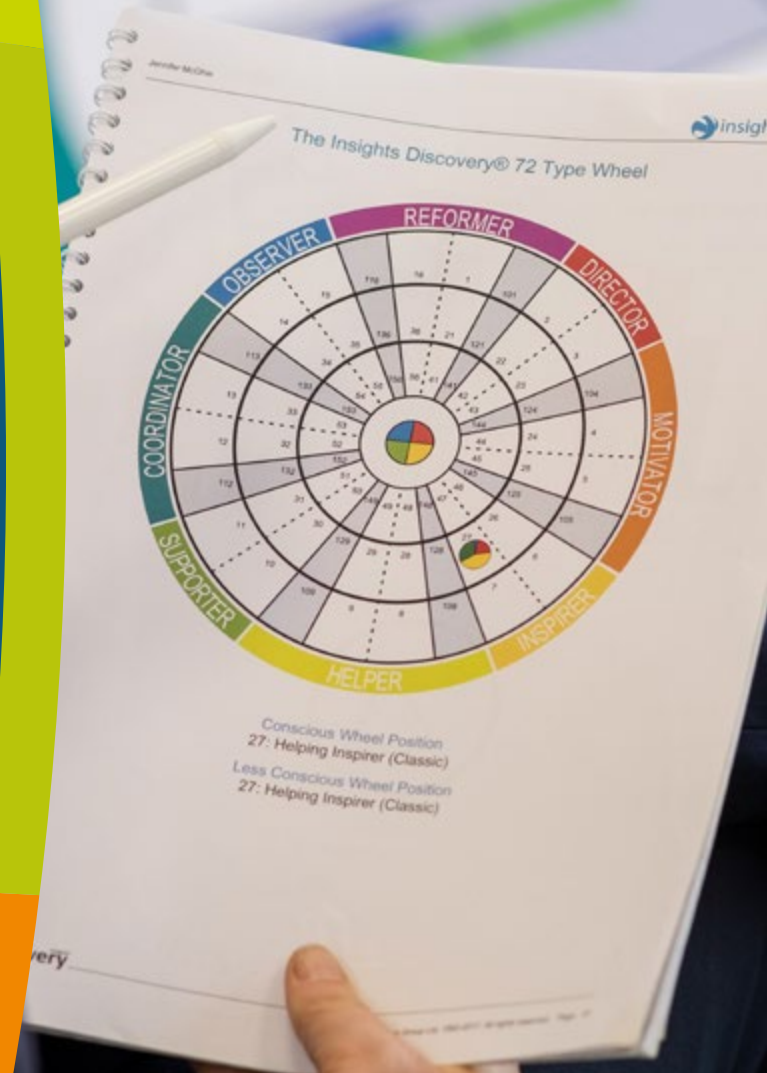
A final note…

Now it's time to kick off those 'I'm the one in charge' shoes and take a 'walk in the wilderness'.

Consider your leadership style and the preferences of people in your team. Are you offering them the adequate support they need? Do they feel empowered, or are they on edge?

Perhaps, with reflection, we can all be 'empathetic', 'better partners', 'better listeners' and ultimately, 'better leaders'.

After all, it was this version of Steve Jobs that led Apple to the success it enjoys today.

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