



## Why Empathy Works

A September 21, 2021 Forbes article entitled, “Empathy is the Most Important Leadership Skill According to Research,” by Tracy Brower, offers powerful and clear data that one of the most vital skills for managers is the ability to be empathetic with employees.

Empathy is a highly effective tool for managers to relate with direct reports and others within their organizations as people first and work generators second.

Let’s take a moment and look at the actual definitions of empathy. From a purely clinical standpoint, empathy can be defined as “I feel what you feel.” But current usage and language evolution has softened that definition now to, “I can relate to how you are feeling. I have felt that way myself and understand what it feels like.” Empathetic behavior from managers is closely tied to Emotional Intelligence (EI). One of the most useful questions that the study of EI includes is, “Can I use what I am feeling plus what others are feeling to establish stronger relationships?” Empathy is often the first place to find an answer to that question.

Too often managers are reticent to encourage empathetic discussions with employees because the manager thinks he or she is now obliged to fix whatever is described by the employee. While it might be true that in some companies there are resources available to which the manager might refer the employee, but even then there is no reasonable suggestion that the problems the employee is experiencing are for the managers to fix.

The power of empathy is in the listening and connecting with others about how they’re feeling. Of course, the implied skill in making empathy real is listening. It requires the manager to get out of his or her own way and tune into the messages being shared by the employee.

Recently, one of our client managers shared a story with us that clearly demonstrates the power of listening and empathy. The manager is highly placed within his company and oversees a large number of crews who work outdoors, often in residential areas. Since this was a new assignment for this manager, he began a series of visits to the job sites these crews were working on, despite the fact that he was more than three levels higher than the crew members themselves. As per union contract, there was a police officer on the site chosen this day to control traffic while the crew worked. The manager greeted and conversed with the officer for a few minutes before he gathered his crew in a circle and asked them how they were doing. The most senior member of the crew with a reputation for complaining, spoke up and said, “Whenever I see a truck like yours show up on a job site, I know it’ll be bad news for somebody, usually me.” The manager replied, “Yes I remember how that felt when I did the job you have. Tell me what I need to do to change that perception.” The employee answered, “Well, discussions like this one is a great place to start.”

The punchline to this story came from the police officer on the job. He took the manager aside and told him that in his ten years on the police force, he had never had a discussion like that with his bosses. He was so impressed that he asked the

*(OVER)*

manager if the company was hiring since he might consider switching careers.

The ability to think and behave empathetically may be inborn. When a manager says that he or she is incapable of empathy, what we may be seeing is that a life experience has taught that manager to ignore empathetic feelings, often relating them to weakness or “softness” within the managerial role description. The research shows that those feelings can be reignited, especially when the results have such a strong effect on overall performance.

The statistics in Tracy Brower’s article are powerfully compelling. She cites a global study, conducted by Qualtrics, pointing out what we all are experiencing in is varying degrees of uncertainty and worry these days: 67% of people are experiencing stress, 57% have increased anxiety, 54% say they are emotionally exhausted, and 53% describe themselves as sad.

None of those emotional states is conducive to innovation, collaboration, extra effort or teamwork in

the workplace. Managers are reporting aggressively negative speech and behavior from employees who have never done that before. One study Brower cites, from Georgetown University, showed that workplace incivility caused reduced performance, lack of collaboration, deteriorated customer experience and increased turnover.

So, listening to employees and offering empathy is not easy, because often the messages are critical of management or of the manager individually. In our story above, the manager could easily have become defensive and argumentative. Since he did not take that position, he was successful at changing the perceptions of his role, and the employee with the bad reputation felt heard perhaps for the first time.

The research shows that the results of an empathetic work environment are powerfully effective, positively affecting innovation, engagement, retention, inclusivity and work-life balance.

