

Emerging with Empathy: Continuing to lead with care and compassion

by Rowena Hennigan

In a worldwide crisis such as Covid-19 leadership strips back to its most fundamental element: having a positive impact on people's lives and showing that leaders can be kind to themselves as well as others both in their professional and personal lives.

The ongoing challenges in Ireland for business leaders

More than a year after the pandemic hit, businesses in Ireland are still pondering whether to return to the office and when, while considering making plans for "hybrid" work arrangements. The continual unpredictability of the pandemic together with the changing nature of restrictions have not only called for patience from all of the Irish population but also from business leaders: juggling between supporting both their teams and their stakeholders, and the gradual re-opening of physical office locations has demanded an extra level of resilience and strength of character. In fact, coping with the uncertainty of the current landscape and the continual impact of restrictions has caused exhaustion and stress to many individuals.

Living at work

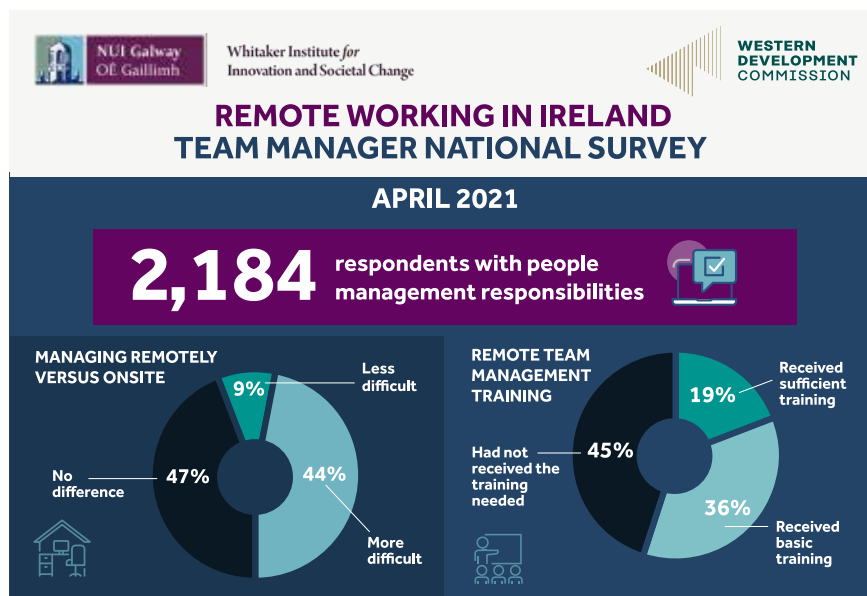
It is no surprise that the phrase 'living at work' rather than 'working from home' became common during 2020. The experience of being thrown into working from home during a global pandemic was an extreme event for many. For some, it was combined with competing priorities and distractions such as childcare, while for others, it was an isolating experience where the boundaries between work and life became completely blurred.

Not only were workers affected by a situation that dramatically upended the working world: the pandemic has in fact created unanticipated business and leadership problems, where leaders and managers of all types found themselves faced with the extra challenge of

managing distributed teams, whilst often struggling themselves. Data shows that the majority had never led a team remotely or been trained to do such, with 44% finding remote leadership to be more difficult compared to traditional settings:

What does Empathy look like in a leader?

When we interact with others, hear their stories, understand their situation, listen carefully and validate what they have told us, we begin to understand them better.



Source: http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Remote-Working-Survey_Infographics_Team-Manager.pdf

How can leaders be attuned to the needs of their businesses and their people, when the stresses in their own lives have increased during the pandemic? Many of them started by showing themselves self-compassion and empathy, and "put their own" lifejacket on first, seeking support through their own self-care practices and perhaps also reaching out for peer support.

When we can place ourselves in that person's situation, we can begin to grasp what they are experiencing. Interestingly, the word 'empathy' comes from the Greek *empathia* – *em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling), suggesting a movement towards and into someone else's pain, moving from one place, ourselves, to another place – the other's space, feelings and pain.

As stated by Daniel Goleman, the author of the book *Emotional Intelligence*, empathy is the ability to understand others' emotions. However, taking this lesson to a deeper level, empathy can become a way of defining,

understanding and reacting to the concerns and needs that underlie others' emotional responses and reactions. In the case of managers, practising empathy as a leadership skill means building a bond of trust, gaining insight into how people think and feel, and supporting the staff in times of drastic change and crisis.

However, embracing emotions and reactions in a crisis is, first of all, done on an individual level: unless we recognize our own natural human response to a crisis and process these strong emotions, we won't be able to grasp these reactions from whoever we seek to help. To put it in another way, leaders must help themselves before they can do the same for others.

Try recalling when you have been inspired by a leader: generally, that leader has already nurtured their own empathy in themselves, fostering their ability to understand, appreciate and perhaps support others.

In a 2007 paper, Gentry, Weber and Sadri analysed data from 6,731 managers from 38 different countries and found that empathy is positively related to job performance and is more important in some cultures than others.

In conclusion, that study found that the ability to understand what others are feeling is a skill that clearly contributes to effective leadership. In some cultures, the connection between empathy and performance is particularly striking,

placing an even greater value on empathy as a leadership skill.

Source - <https://irishtechnews.ie/leaders-need-empathy-more-than-any-other-skill/>

My personal experience with cultivating empathy in a crisis

I live in Zaragoza, in Spain with my family. We moved to Spain from Ireland 4 years ago. The first lockdown in Spain, between March and June 2020, was a very tough period for my family unit. Some people called this working from home experience, "living at work" and it certainly felt like that. We were confined to a 70-meter city centre apartment for almost 3 months, with very little outdoor space access. My 7-year-old daughter struggled with the confinement and I, in turn, experienced anxiety in response to her emotional reaction.

Keeping the anxiety under control required putting in place some physical and mental wellness "rituals": in a daily lock-down routine it was the small things I did for myself such as taking long baths, meditations on our terrace in the mornings, yoga on my own in evenings and taking regular breaks during my computer work time, that provided me with the support I needed for my mental health.

Looking back, my self-leadership traits of self-awareness, observation and adjustment kicked into action. In other words, I realised that due to the intensity of the situation, I needed to prioritise

downtime, breaks and my self-care activities.

I began to investigate and read more extensively on supporting my own self-leadership needs through more positive and intentional self-care activities. The following quote by a Leadership Coach, Palena Neale in the Harvard Business Review, really caught my attention:

Despite the well-known benefits, many leaders remain resistant to the whole idea of self-care. This resistance often stems from a feeling that self-care is a sign of weakness, a feeling that they just don't have time, or just generally rolling their eyes at the entire concept.

She argues that self-care for leaders needs to be reframed and that it needs to be seen as an investment that can increase their overall productivity and effectiveness as a leader.

Source - <https://hbr.org/2020/10/serious-leaders-need-self-care-too>

The situation in Ireland: Proactive initiatives during Covid-19

By mid-2020, Ireland had one of the highest rates of WFH in Europe, with over 40% by comparison with an EU average of 33.7%. The National Remote Working Survey confirmed that workplace productivity can be maintained in home working. Over 5,600 workers were surveyed and 62% of respondents agreed that working remotely increases their productivity.



In a similar survey undertaken by Ámarach for the Fórsa trade union, the figure for increased productivity was slightly lower at 50%. At an organisational level, dynamic and responsive leaders began to proactively promote practical initiatives to counteract the impact of home working. Examples included:

- **Mimic the commute** - suggesting home workers walked, cycled or got outside during the usual commute to/from work time period.
- **Walkabout meetings** - planning walking, audio work meetings.
- **Plant and grow** - delivering plant boxes to staff homes to encourage non-work activities and sharing of gardening tips.
- **Step challenges** - team and group walking challenges to build morale and support health and wellbeing.
- **Zoom quizzes and challenges** - supporting team social interactions via various video conferencing events and challenges.

These proactive initiatives show that Irish leaders and organisations DID appreciate the need for empathy and compassion during the pandemic response, taking their observations and concerns and moving them to supportive action.

Let's take a deeper look at the attributes of compassionate leadership, as outlined by Jess Baker, a business psychologist and leadership coach, in an article in Accounting and Business Magazine. According to Jess, these are the fundamental traits of a compassionate leader:

- **empathy** – they can tune into how other people are feeling.
- **curiosity** – they take an authentic interest in others; ignoring preconceived ideas of people (ie unconscious bias) helps everyone to feel included.
- **connectivity** – they develop healthy relationships with colleagues and clients.
- **contribution** - they consider their work meaningful and understand their role in delivering outcomes, cooperating fully with colleagues, and committing to the result.
- **courage** - because the right decision is not always an easy one to take

Source - <https://abmagazine.accaglobal.com/global/articles/2021/mar/careers/leading-with-empathy.html>

In an ever-evolving world such as the one we live in, change management skills will become more and more important and leadership teams must be guided by empathy while approaching challenges with adaptability and resilience, enabling the whole organization to thrive in any given situation. Tim Segaller, Director and co-founder of Rising Minds, puts it succinctly in this quote:

"Long gone are the days where leaders get the most out of their teams through command and control, or paternalistic micromanagement. We now know from neuroscience research that the parts of the brain most associated with interest and motivation light up when people feel that their core needs and values are understood and taken seriously."

He continues:

"It's about getting in touch with your natural human interest and compassion for those you work with and allowing this to continually shape your working practices" he pointed out.

"You don't need an expert to tell you how to do this. You are already an expert on empathy by virtue of being a member of the human race. You just need to remember to keep asking people what they need and then to listen to what they tell you."

Source: <https://jobs.accaglobal.com/article/building-empathetic-workplaces/>

Conclusion

Segaller's argument has my complete support, and I would further reflect on an interesting fact brought by the pandemic: with an unexpected glimpse into each other's intimate home settings caused by home working and video calls, Covid-19 has accelerated leaders' ability to be compassionate, to really listen and relate to their team's experience. Now, with the summer months giving leaders the rest time and recovery they need, they can continue as they have already started: asking people what they need, listening and then doing what is their power to support their teams, building on the foundation of compassionate leadership already created. Truly "emerging with empathy" into the next stage of the pandemic recovery.

Ireland had one of the highest rates of WFH in Europe

Other links

<https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/features/what-makes-a-high-potential-remote-worker>

<https://hbr.org/2018/02/how-to-collaborate-effectively-if-your-team-is-remote>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/02/06/the-importance-of-empathy-in-leadership/>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tessbrigham/2021/04/19/the-key-to-being-a-great-virtual-leader-is-empathy/>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/10/12/14-authentic-ways-to-demonstrate-empathy-when-leading-remotely/>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/insights-ey/2021/07/01/the-human-centered-ceo/?sh=31a942ca65a5>

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/workplace-skills-learning-linkedin-report/>

<https://www.accountingtoday.com/opinion/creating-a-culture-of-motivation>

<https://www.journalofaccountancy.com/news/2020/jul/cpa-financial-planners-empathy-during-coronavirus-crisis.html>



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Rowena is a Remote Work Expert, Lecturer and published course author. She is considered an international thought leader on the Future of Work and Remote Work Skills.