

The Empathic Leader

by Ben Rawal

In leadership, empathy is frequently identified as a critical area and one that offers consistent value within a team environment. After more than two years of living with COVID, many businesses are now beginning to encourage their teams back to the office. Ben Rawal explores why empathy will become even more important to those in a leadership position.

The inevitable post-COVID return to the office is something that many of us have been awaiting with delight: an opportunity to re-establish some of our long standing personal relationships, and finally conduct a 'real' meeting once again.

Despite the anticipation and welcomed excitement that this may hold for many of us, other individuals are reluctant or even fearful of returning to a pre-COVID world. In many respects, it is difficult to compare our experiences of COVID with one another. Although we have all faced the challenges of lockdowns and restrictions to our daily lives, some of us have also lost friends and family members.

We will all have unique memories of the past two years, coping with and accepting a new reality in our own time and way. It is against this backdrop, that many of us have now begun the return to an office environment. Most businesses have welcomed their teams back to the office on a hybrid working basis, although some have already returned to a full-time arrangement.

Irrespective of how your organisation has chosen to address the return to office, leaders now face arguably the biggest challenge (and opportunity) they have ever faced.

Understanding empathy

As a concept, empathy is a relatively new aspect of our psychology and behaviour, initially being used as a phrase just over a hundred years ago.

In more recent times, the growth of emotional intelligence promoted the importance of empathy when forming

and maintaining relationships, and largely focuses on understanding and appreciating how others are feeling. The key word here however, is understanding. Individuals with high levels of empathy do not have to agree with how others are feeling in any given situation – but do they understand?

A feeling of excitement for one individual, may be experienced as fear by another in the same situation. Good leaders understand how different individuals can experience such variability in emotions. Although the situation may appear similar or even identical for two or more individuals, the way the situation is interpreted will be different. Our unique way of 'seeing the world', based on our beliefs, bias and experience will create different thoughts and feelings. Empathy ensures that we recognise how different interpretations can create different results – both logically and emotionally.

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As leaders, we should also recognise that members of our team are likely to have reached different levels of psychological acceptance when it comes to their COVID experience.

Some individuals may still be coming to terms with the changes they have experienced through the pandemic, and

are likely to behave differently to those that are now in a position to 'move on'.

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It's not my problem!

At one time or another, we have a tendency to dismiss the feelings of others as insignificant or an over-reaction on their part. We may use statements such as "You're being oversensitive!" or "Get over it!" Perhaps you can recall a time when you've totally ignored how someone else is feeling?

As rational and logical thinkers, we have the ability to solve problems and 'think things through' – an advantage that we have as humans, compared with other animals on the planet. Yet, we need to be in the right mindset to tackle an issue in a calm, non-emotional way. If we feel upset, angry, or afraid, our focus will remain on these emotions, limiting our ability to think logically and deal with the issue. This is one of the reasons why our best intentions to help someone solve their problems is often unsuccessful – the individual needs to be ready to deal with the issue.

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In leadership, time is often precious. This can create a conflict between giving a team member sufficient space to deal with their emotions, and getting the job done. Working in the area of accountancy also creates additional pressures due to the importance of meeting deadlines, client expectations and performance targets. This is why it is important to develop a good understanding of your team – how they perform when they are at their best, problems or concerns that they're dealing with, and notable changes in their behaviour. As a leader, the quicker you act and the more proactive you can be in helping your team, the easier it becomes to managing the future impact.

From a COVID perspective, challenge yourself as to how effectively you have continued to engage with your team members during the past couple of years. Many of us have now become accustomed to virtual meetings, sometimes with cameras switched off. COVID has impacted our ability to build and maintain relationships with our teams, an important pre-requisite to understanding how individuals are feeling.

Regardless of whether you have been effective in managing the relationship with your team during COVID, our emotions are an important driver of our behaviour. If we choose to ignore or dismiss them, it is unlikely that they we will achieve a high-performing team environment.

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But I'm not feeling it?

I often work alongside leaders that ask how they can show empathy and understand how a member of

their team is feeling, when they don't recognise their own emotions themselves.

Developing our own self-awareness is an important aspect of emotional growth, but is not necessarily essential for empathising with our team. You may be surprised to learn that empathy is a logical skill, and requires rational thinking to genuinely do it justice. This may appear odd, given that empathy focuses on the emotions of others, but your ability to understand someone else's feelings can be learned, practiced and recognised on a more regular basis.

The concept of Cognitive Empathy covers this ability to deduce how someone is feeling, based on a variety of

observational factors – facial expressions, body language, changes in voice tone, and other behavioural nuances. As a leader, becoming an expert in emotion is not necessary, but becoming more observant about change is essential. This should be your minimum goal or position as an empathic leader – to logically understand what your observations mean from an emotional perspective.

At times of course, some individuals allow themselves to become emotionally attached to how others are feeling. In other words, we create a connection between our thoughts and our feelings, and may even experience some of the emotions that other individuals are dealing with. Known as



Emotional Empathy, it offers the most intuitive and representative perspective of how someone else is feeling. In a leadership role however, Emotional Empathy can be distracting or stressful for those in a senior position. The key point is to ensure that you can logically understand how someone feels without having to also carry the burden of their emotions.

Often identified as a suitable 'middle ground' between Cognitive and Emotional Empathy, is Compassionate Empathy. This combines the logical understanding of how someone is feeling, with the willingness to help based on the individual's readiness to receiving support.

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Ben's top tips for self-reflection:

Top tips for Empathic Leadership

Understanding Others – Empathy begins by understanding others – how they behave, how they feel and what they think. We will often form judgements based on what we see or hear, without genuinely attempting to understand the individual. Invest time in understanding your team at a deeper (non-superficial) level, and remember that you don't always have to agree with how they see the world.

Are you ready?

Individuals aren't always searching for a solution to the problem they face – at least not in the short-term. At times, it can feel cathartic to 'unload' our woes, feelings and problems without being judged or searching for a viable solution. Problem solving is best attempted when individuals are ready for

The COVID conundrum

As our teams continue to return to the office, arguably there has never been a more important time for empathic leadership. Taking the time and making an effort to understand how your teams are feeling is an important first step, the impact of which should not be underestimated.

These efforts should not come at your own expense, of course – you will also have experienced your own unique journey during the past couple of years, that may still require a level of support. During these times, patience with yourself and others around you, may just be the most viable strategy for the future.



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