

# WHY EMPATHY IS A SUPERPOWER IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

Empathy is a critical human skill. It allows people to create connections and demonstrate care and understanding for colleagues, especially during times of rapid change like the Covid-19 crisis and the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>1</sup>

Empathy also can be an organizational superpower.<sup>2</sup>

## Empathy is

- Linked with effective team collaboration, reduced stress, increased morale, and more inclusive attitudes at work.<sup>3</sup>
- A skill that can be cultivated and developed.<sup>4</sup>
- A multifaceted skill through which human beings understand, show concern, and relate to each other across three dimensions—**cognitive**, **emotional**, and **behavioral**.



## Three dimensions of empathy<sup>5</sup>

The **cognitive** dimension includes being able to see and understand another's thoughts, emotions, and perspectives. It is the intentional process of setting aside how you would respond in a similar situation to understand *their* perspectives and experiences. It also involves checking in about whether you are understanding another's experience accurately in a way that resonates with them.



The **emotional** dimension includes sharing another's emotional state and showing similarity in feelings. It may involve feeling a sense of care, connection, and appreciation for another person's emotions.



The **behavioral** dimension includes actions that demonstrate a sense of empathy for others, such as communicating concern and understanding and matching body language. Because empathy is an interpersonal process, it's important to also share our thoughts and feelings and stay present in our interactions. Empathic behaviors at work include caring communication, behavioral mirroring of nonverbals, being curious about and eliciting other people's perspectives, inclusive collaboration and teamwork, and active listening.

## Empathy is not

- Just feeling sorry for another person (sympathy) or only acting to alleviate another person's pain (compassion).<sup>6</sup>
- Assuming the other person should react to a situation based on how *you* would respond, think, or feel if in a similar situation.
- Accepting bad behavior from people while trying to understand their feelings or experiences.
- Solving others' problems for them.
- A burden on time and energy.

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## Empathy and the organization



When people fail to empathize with others, they may simply not be motivated or have skill in caring, sharing, and understanding what someone else is experiencing.<sup>7</sup> To build a culture of empathy, we must increase people's motives *and* skill for empathy, showing care and appreciation for others' experiences, extending beyond a specific situation in the moment.<sup>8</sup> Showing empathy and concern is not only important for organizational success; it can boost individual wellbeing and happiness at no personal cost.<sup>9</sup>

Business leaders may believe that empathy is a critical skill in the workplace but struggle to bring it to life because they mistakenly think they are better at exhibiting empathy than their employees perceive them to be, creating an "empathy gap."<sup>10</sup> It is critical to address this gap. Employees increasingly expect empathy in their workplaces and see it connected to flexibility, engagement and wellness, and diversity and inclusion strategies:<sup>11</sup>



of employees across various life stages **value flexibility as important** for empathy at work.



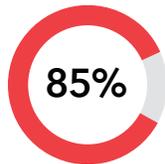
of employees felt **companies offering programs to address wellbeing and mental health** were more empathic.



of employees reported that they are **likely to stay with an empathic employer**.



of HR professionals and CEOs believe their **organization is more empathic when they have diversity in their leadership**.



of employees report **increased empathy results from strategies to improve diversity and inclusion** at work.

## Build a culture of empathy



Begin demonstrating empathy through empathic communication, active listening, and checking your understanding to start building a culture of care and understanding. Reducing competitiveness, zero-sum thinking, and power and hierarchy are important cultural elements to address in your organization before implementing empathy skill-building activities and training—such as new, immersive trainings that use virtual reality—in order to build the proper motivation and circumstances for success.<sup>12</sup>

**Empathy is a skill connected to diversity and inclusion and has impacts for businesses, positively influencing employee wellbeing, motivation, productivity, work-life effectiveness, retention, and engagement.**<sup>13</sup> With expected talent shortages in the future of work,<sup>14</sup> attracting and keeping your employees will be vital for success now and into the future as we address issues of racial justice and emerge post-Covid-19. Invest in developing this skill throughout your organization to be a step ahead while valuing the humanity of your workforce in difficult times.

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**Authors:** Lauren Pasquarella Daley, Tara Van Bommel, and Sheila Brassel

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