## Leveraging Empathy to Build Antiracist Organizations



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## Building Empathy for People From Marginalized Racial, Ethnic, and **Cultural Groups**

More and more forward-thinking organizations are recognizing that empathy is an essential leadership skill and a business imperative, now and in the future of work. 1 Many of them have begun to implement programs to encourage and develop leaders' empathy skills.<sup>2</sup> Common understandings of empathy generally emphasize "putting yourself in another" person's shoes" when engaging with team members and colleagues. But what if that other person is from a different race, ethnicity, or culture? How can organizations make sure that leaders display empathy in a way that recognizes how our racial, ethnic, and cultural differences affect our perceptions, actions, and experiences?

First, we must begin with the understanding that empathy is a multifaceted skill composed of cognitive (e.g., perspective-taking), emotional (e.g., feeling the same or similar emotions as another), and behavioral components (e.g., demonstrating care and concern, or taking action to support or alleviate suffering). However, leveraging empathy is about much more than perspective-taking, or momentarily putting ourselves—with our own life experiences—in someone else's "shoes"; it's about understanding how colleagues—with their own unique life experiences—came to have these "shoes" and the journey they've traveled in them.



Specifically, when interacting with someone from a different racial, ethnic, or cultural group, it's critical to acknowledge that the path to empathy requires recognizing cultural differences and understanding our own individual biases. We must also keep in mind that our biases exist within societal systems and norms that perpetuate prejudice and discrimination.

We call this concept, which has been studied by other researchers, 4 "racial and ethnic" empathy," and it is critical for communicating across differences, mitigating bias, and building inclusive workplace cultures. Importantly, our data from 1,664 White leaders in the Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and South Africa show that this skill is essential for building a climate of senior leader allyship and garnering support for DEI initiatives.

## What Is Racial and Ethnic Empathy?

Racial and ethnic empathy $\frac{5}{2}$  is the ability to experience and demonstrate empathy for people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and it is composed of four elements:



APPRECIATION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Recognizing and appreciating racial and ethnic cultural differences and traditions.



**EMPATHIC AWARENESS** 

Awareness of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination that people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups experience, as well as the interpersonal, institutional, and systemic oppression they endure.



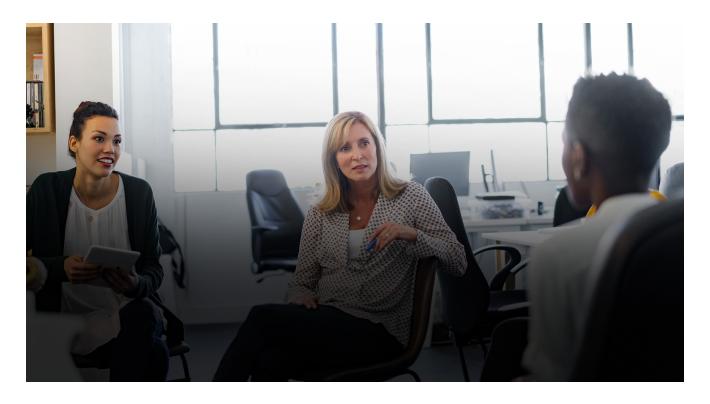
EMPATHIC PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

Consciously trying to understand what it would feel like to be a person of another racial or ethnic background; the ability to relate to people's stories of racial or ethnic discrimination in their day-to-day lives.



EMPATHIC FEELING AND EXPRESSION

Feeling a sense of injustice when people from other racial and ethnic groups are treated unfairly; seeking ways to promote equity for people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.



## Who Needs to Develop More Racial and Ethnic Empathy?

Although racial and ethnic empathy is an important skill for everyone in the workplace to develop, there are several reasons it is imperative to focus on developing this skill among White leaders specifically.

- There is an inverse relationship between power and empathy; the more power people have, the less empathic they are. Given their race and rank, White leaders hold both social and formal power, making them more likely to struggle with racial and ethnic empathy.
- Research suggests that on average, people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups have higher levels of racial and ethnic empathy than White people.<sup>8</sup>
- White people's experiences, perspectives, and culture are often positioned as the default in White-dominant countries, so people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups tend to have more experience empathizing with White people than vice versa. 9

White leaders hold disproportionate power and those who can cultivate racial and ethnic empathy have the potential to use their power to be allies to and advocates for people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, and ultimately contribute to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization.

# Racial and Ethnic Empathy Combats In-group Empathy Bias

To reap the benefits of empathy, we must also understand the barriers that might block the development of empathy or even cause it to backfire. One of the primary barriers arises when we engage with someone from a different racial, ethnic, social, or cultural background or identity than our own, which has been shown to interfere with our ability to demonstrate empathy. 10



We may have an opportunity to engage in empathy and "put ourselves in another person's shoes." But what happens when that person's "shoes"—or life experiences—are profoundly different from ours, possibly in ways we can barely imagine? In these instances, empathy may fail. What's more, the result may even be an "antiempathy" effect. When this happens, instead of feeling empathy, we may feel aggression or apathy toward the other person or their experience, or even joy when they suffer and experience pain. 11 Essentially, when someone is like us, it's much easier to empathize, and when they are not, the opposite can happen.

In the workplace, these types of empathy failures may be more common than you think. For example, imagine that a White man confides in a colleague that he was passed over for a promotion and expresses his frustration and disappointment. If his colleague is an ingroup member—also a White man—then he is more easily able to see the perspective of his colleague (cognitive empathy); he likely shares in his colleague's frustration (emotional empathy) and may even advocate to his manager on his behalf (behavioral empathy). Now imagine a Black woman with the same credentials and demonstrated performance as the first man confides in her White man colleague that she was passed over for a promotion and shares her frustration and disappointment over the outcome. In this case, her White man colleague is more likely to fail to empathize, and instead might feel indignant at her presumption to think her work more deserving of a promotion, or even be glad that she didn't get it. This is the anti-empathy effect, and without skill in racial and ethnic empathy, it is a prominent barrier to reaping the benefits of empathy in the workplace.

Recognizing the potential for the opposite of empathy, it is essential to cultivate the ability to understand the experiences of people from other groups. We know empathy is a powerful tool for individuals, leaders, and organizations to cut through bias and build inclusive, innovative, and respectful workplaces that can meet the demands of the shifting paradigm of work and life. And our new findings, shared below, show that racial and ethnic empathy is

essential for nurturing climates in which leaders champion diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), engage in allyship behaviors, and garner support for DEI initiatives—which have been shown to tie to critical business outcomes such as engagement and retention. 13

# Over Half of White Leaders Report Having Racial and Ethnic Empathy

We surveyed over 1,600 White leaders in 5 White-dominant countries <sup>14</sup> around the world and found that:

- A little over half report high levels of racial and ethnic empathy. 15
- White leaders who know someone who has experienced racism or discrimination are
   1.8 times more likely to have high levels of racial and ethnic empathy. 16

# Racial and Ethnic Empathy Drives Support for Marginalized Colleagues

- White leaders who have high levels of racial and ethnic empathy are more likely to believe that leaders should be champions for DEI—for example, by actively promoting equitable treatment of employees across racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, speaking out against racial discrimination, and advocating for antidiscrimination initiatives.<sup>17</sup>
- Racial and ethnic empathy explains 26% of a leader's belief that leaders should be champions for DEI.

### Racial and Ethnic Empathy Drives Peer Allyship and Retention

• White leaders with high levels of racial and ethnic empathy are more likely to say that their peers act as visible allies for people from marginalized groups by vocally supporting people from marginalized groups, seeking to understand the experiences of people different from them, actively seeking to learn from different points of view and reach understanding through listening, and making DEI a priority even if it's unpopular. In other words, racial and ethnic empathy is linked to a broader climate in which these allyship behaviors are the norm.

Leaders who perceive a climate in which their peers serve as allies to members of
marginalized groups are more likely to want to stay with their organization. Specifically,
leaders who report that their peers engage in allyship behaviors are 26% less likely to
report that they have high turnover intentions.<sup>21</sup>



#### The Bottom Line

Racial and ethnic empathy is a powerful mechanism for creating a workplace in which leaders advocate for DEI and support colleagues from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Organizations that invest in training and experiences to build this skill in their leaders will be better positioned to build an equitable future of work where everyone can belong, contribute, and thrive.



#### WHITE LEADERS:

Employees from marginalized racial and ethnic groups are tired of feeling unsupported, belittled, dismissed, invalidated, and alone when it comes to conversations about racism and discrimination. Develop your racial and ethnic empathy skills so that your ability to connect with employees is not influenced by their race or ethnicity and you can help dismantle systemic racism and inequity in the workplace.

#### **Actions**

# <u>Learn about racism and its impact</u> on people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

- Expose yourself to various media (e.g., tv shows, podcasts, books) and content created by people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups.
- Stories that center on the lives of people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups can expose you to a different experience by enabling you to look at the world through their eyes.
- Acknowledge and sit with feelings of discomfort that may come up when listening to stories about racism. Recognize any feelings of guilt or responsibility if they arise and understand they can co-exist with empathy and feelings of pain and anger.

### Identify with the targets of discrimination rather than the perpetrators.

- When learning about people's experiences with prejudice, discrimination, and
  oppression, ask yourself if you are identifying with the person whom you are most
  similar to and notice who you are tending to believe. Instead, imagine what it would be
  like to be subjected to those injuries. This is especially important if you belong to the
  dominant group, or the group historically or presently responsible for acts of
  oppression.
- Check your understanding: Instead of assuming you know what something is like for another person, ask. Reflect what you hear to ensure that you've understood them accurately, and then listen to understand, especially when they correct you. Offer gratitude for what was shared and validate their experiences.
- The healing of intergenerational trauma is necessary for our societies to move past the
  many atrocities that have been committed upon people from marginalized racial and
  ethnic groups. This work begins when we can allow ourselves to deeply understand a
  vastly different perspective.

### Diversify your networks.

- According to one study, 75% of White people do not have a single close friend of color,<sup>22</sup> yet familiarity is a key predictor of racial and ethnic empathy. The more contact with people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds we have, the more likely we are to develop racial and ethnic empathy. Connecting across differences can be uncomfortable at first, but as you lean into the discomfort and build cross-race friendships, these feelings tend to dissipate over time.
- At work, attend events that tend to attract people from diverse racial backgrounds such as DEI talks or cultural holiday celebrations.

 Outside of work, visit businesses owned by people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, such as coffee shops or bookstores, or volunteer in a different part of town if your neighborhood is not racially diverse.

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#### **Endnotes**

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- 14. N=1,664 Participants were working in the United States (30.8%), United Kingdom (26.1%), Canada (19.6%), Australia (18.3%), and South Africa (5.2%). Mean age was 41 years. 50.7% were women, 48.9% were men, and 0.4% were trans or nonbinary. 91.3% did not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or asexual, while 8% did, and 0.6% preferred not to say. 35.8% were first-level managers, 31.1% second-level management, 20.1% senior-level management, and 13% C-level executives. Top functions represented included administration/general management (22.3%), computer/information systems management (13.7%), finance/accounting/purchasing (10.9%), operations management/manufacturing (9%), and teaching/training (6.7%).
- 15. Racial and ethnic empathy was measured utilizing a short form of the ethnocultural empathy scale (Wang et al., 2003). We utilized 18 of the 31 total items which were assessed on a 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree) Likert scale. The scale showed good internal reliability (α = .76), and thus we created a composite score where higher values indicated higher levels of racial and ethnic empathy. These continuous scores were dichotomized such that scores of 4 or higher were categorized as high levels of racial and ethnic empathy, and scores of 3.99 or lower were categorized as low levels. Frequencies on these categories revealed that 44.5% of White leaders have low levels of racial and ethnic empathy, and 55.5% have high levels.
- 16. Leaders answered either "yes" or "no" to whether they know someone who has experienced racism or discrimination because of their ethnicity, nationality, or religion in their respective country (0 = no and 1 = yes). This item was submitted to a binary logistic regression analysis predicting dichotomized racial and ethnic empathy scores (0 = low racial and ethnic empathy and 1 = high racial and ethnic empathy). The model significantly predicted White leaders' racial and ethnic empathy levels, Nagelkerke  $R^2$  = .02,  $X^2$  (1) = 28.32, p < .001. White leaders who know someone who has experienced racism or discrimination are 1.76 times more likely to have high racial and ethnic empathy compared to those who do not know someone who has experienced discrimination or racism (Wald (df=1, N=1664) = 28.14, OR = 1.76, p < .001).
- 17. Respondents answered five items indicating whether they believed that leaders in their current organization should be champions for DEI. Example items include: "It is important for people in leadership roles to actively promote equal treatment of all employees across ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds"; "People in senior leadership roles should do more than just acknowledge that racism or ethnic bias exists"; and "Leaders should proactively (i.e., with words and actions) show that they are advocates for antidiscrimination initiatives." These five items were highly correlated (rs = .45 .67), thus the items were averaged to create a composite score. A linear regression assessed the impact of racial and ethnic empathy on White leaders' beliefs that leaders should be champions for DEI. The overall model was significant,  $R^2 = .26$ , F(1, 1662) = 592.31, p < .001. Racial and ethnic empathy was a significant predictor of White leaders' beliefs that leaders should be champions for DEI, b = .95, t(1662) = 24.34, p < .001.

- 18. There is a significant difference in the percentage of White leaders with high levels of racial and ethnic empathy and the percentage of those with low levels who report high levels of valuing or believing that leaders should be champions for DEI,  $X^2$  (1) = 226.46, p < 001.
- 19. Leaders answered four questions that assessed the extent to which they believe their colleagues (also leaders) engage in allyship behaviors. Example items include: "[My colleagues] are role models for diversity and inclusion in our organization"; "[My colleagues] vocally support people from marginalized or under-represented groups"; and "[My colleagues] make diversity and inclusion a priority, even if it may be uncommon or unpopular." These four items were highly correlated (rs = .60 .64), thus the items were averaged to create a composite score. A linear regression assessed the impact of racial and ethnic empathy on White leaders' perceptions of allyship among their peers. The overall model was significant,  $R^2 = .11$ , F(1, 1662) = 211.80, p < .001. Racial and ethnic empathy was a significant predictor of White leaders' perceptions that their peers engage in allyship behaviors, b = .68, t(1662) = 14.55, p < .001.
- 20. There is a significant difference in the percentage of White leaders with high levels of racial and ethnic empathy and those with low levels who report high levels of allyship norms among their peers,  $X^2$  (1) = 113.06, p < 001.
- 21. Leaders were asked how often they think of leaving their current job and responded on a 1 (never) to 7 (always) scale. This scale was dichotomized such that values of 1-3 were recoded as 0 (low turnover intent), and values of 4-7 as 1 (high turnover intent). This item was submitted to a binary logistic regression analysis predicted by dichotomized allyship behaviors (0 = low allyship behaviors and 1 = high allyship behaviors). The model significantly predicted White leaders' turnover intentions, Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .01$ ,  $X^2$  (1) = 8.06, p < .01. White leaders who perceive a climate in which their peers engage in high levels of allyship behaviors are 26% less likely to report high levels of turnover intentions (Wald (df=1, N=1601) = 8.08, OR = .74, p < .01).
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