

Empathy Is An Essential Leadership Skill -- And There's Nothing Soft About It

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Insights into the psychology underlying critical choices for leaders.

One of the best resource on leadership insists repeatedly that empathy is essential for competent leadership.

Why? Empathy enables you to know if the people you're trying to reach are actually reached. It allows you to predict the effect your decisions and actions will have on core employees and strategize accordingly. Without empathy, you can't build a team or nurture a new generation of leaders. You will not inspire followers or elicit loyalty. Empathy is essential in negotiations and sales: it allows you to know your target's desires and what risks they are or aren't willing to take.

There is a short list of [5 essential cognitive capacities and personality traits](#) that every leader who assumes great responsibility must have. Empathy is one of the core five. (The others are [self-awareness](#), trust, critical thinking and discipline/self-control.)

Empathy is the ability to understand another person's experience, perspective and feelings. It's commonly described as the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes. But make sure you are assessing how *they* would feel in their shoes, not how *you* would feel in their shoes. This is the tricky part.

Can empathy be learned? To some degree. The capacity for empathy is an innate human trait, and like all of these, there is a spectrum of strength and weakness. Some people are more naturally gifted at quickly sensing other peoples' experience. In fact, some people have to be taught to put up an "empathic wall"—*too much* awareness of other peoples' feelings cripples their ability to make decisions that lead to disappointment or bad feelings.

Very successful leaders are often extremely fast information processors. -- what's behind a colleague's wish to propose what immediately looks like a dumb idea? Follow with an empathic comment along the lines of "I can see why you got excited about that because it's an important issue, but unfortunately it would raise compliance problems so we can't pursue that route." A 90-second investment of time can prevent the employee's feeling humiliated and disaffected in the long-term.

If you're naturally low on the empathy scale, at least know you have this deficiency and that there is a cost to it. You can learn to check yourself and do what does not come naturally: before you act, school yourself to think of the people who will be affected and what your action will mean to them. And try to remember to not just recognize but *care about* that impact on others. You can also make sure you have a trusted advisor who fills in the gap in your skillset. That advisor must be empowered to stop you if you're forgetting that there are other people in the world and that their feelings and agendas are not the same as yours—and that these matter.

Whatever your natural endowment for empathy, your capacity for empathy and skill at deploying it waxes and wanes with your own physical and mental state. If you're ill or tired, it's hard to have empathy for anyone but yourself. If you're in the throes of creative excitement, it's disruptive to consider the perspective of others. And that's fine, as long as it doesn't last too long and you know to check back in with the human beings around you.

Don't confuse empathy with making people happy or being nice. Sometimes you'll seek out another's perspective and feelings and purposefully ignore them. Or even use it to gain an advantage. Essentially empathy is a neutral data gathering tool that enables you to understand the human environment within which you are operating in and therefore make better predictions, craft better tactics, inspire loyalty and communicate clearly.