



Deploying Empathy in Your Workplace

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Lead with Empathy

The gun was pointed a few inches from the center of my forehead. It was small. Maybe a 22 caliber. Time slowed. Fight or flight kicked in, and I saw everything in my peripheral vision clearly. A couple of people were looking at us from their table at a restaurant, behind a plate glass window. My friends were a few feet away, wide-eyed and scared. It was late, maybe 1 am, and as I was walking out of the restaurant, I felt this kid staring at me. I walked over to his car and asked him what was up, did he know me? A few snappy sentences later, and I found myself in this precarious situation.

This was, obviously, a pivotal moment in my life. One that has, decades later, helped shape who I am and who I'm striving to become. However, I'm sad to say that experience wasn't the end of my apathetic behavior. It remains

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a poignant reminder of how conversations can go sideways fast. More on that later.

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According to [Deepa Krishnan](#), an educator in Mumbai, “Empathy is innate among humans, but it often takes an immersive real-life experience to bring it to the surface. The world needs business managers who have this sort of empathy — people with courage and the ability to fight battles on behalf of the weak. As countries grapple with poverty, inequality, and injustice, it's imperative that corporate leaders take on the challenge of creating a more equitable, sustainable society.”

It took multiple real-life experiences for me to understand how my lack of empathy affected others, especially in a workplace. Like the time I discovered the makings of an office mutiny. I had just moved from New York—where sarcasm is king—and was a new manager leading a small team of people. One person was a quiet, introverted, and super intelligent software engineer. One day, he was late for a meeting. I saw him putter up on his

motorcycle, with a trail of fluids leaking behind him. It seemed like the bike was barely drivable. He came in and apologized for being late. I said, *“maybe if you fixed your motorcycle you’d be on time.”* I was kidding of course (sarcasm). He nodded and I thought we were good. We continued with the meeting. He was anything but good.

I hadn’t had much experience dealing with passive-aggressiveness. Being a New Yorker, I was used to people expressing how they felt, sometimes with colorful superlatives. But he never pushed back or had anything bad to say—to me. I learned later that he had plenty to say to others. Apparently he was dropping negative remarks in the comments section of our platform’s source code. That wasn’t all. He tried to form a mutiny to have me ousted. He went to others on the team and asked if they’d support having me fired—my sarcastic remarks had cut him so deeply he couldn’t stand working with me. Fortunately for me, the others didn’t agree, and he left the company. I didn’t treat that person right, and never had the chance to apologize. We never spoke again.

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Had I known then what I know now, I would have seen that this quiet engineer was struggling to get by. He didn’t have enough money to buy a new motorcycle, or even fix the one he had. He worked hard for us. He put in long hours, going above and beyond to stay ahead of the curve with our technology. My sarcasm hurt him. Though he didn’t show it, I could have looked for the signs. I could have put myself into his shoes and tried to understand who he was. What motivated him. What he stood for. I should have seen a person who was creative, intelligent, and striving to be respected.

Throughout my early career, I achieved my goals at any cost. I didn’t consider how my actions affected others. So, if someone from another department was blocking or slowing down my project, I’d leapfrog over them, and exert downward pressure by looping in their manager. It always worked. My project was magically sped up or unblocked. Almost instantly. I justified my actions because they were good for the company.

But the company is made up of people. And, when that type of downward pressure is applied to someone, it sours your relationship with them. They know you bypassed them. They feel belittled, pressured, and then forced into compliance. And you’re the source of those feelings. Not only does this wreck your relationship and add friction to future projects, it means that person (and their team) won’t be invested in the project. The end doesn’t always justify the means.

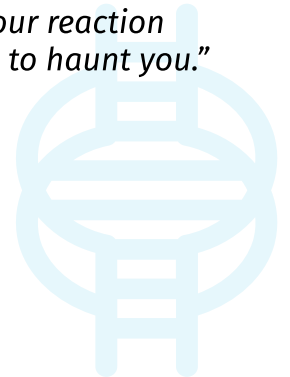
As the late, great, **Maya Angelou** once said, *“...people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”* This is why I believe the next truly great innovations won’t revolve around technology. They won’t be based on data or analytics. The business world is already rich in data, analytics, and technology. But to get the real benefit of that wealth of information, you need that entirely human quality called empathy. The next great innovations will advance our ability to develop and exercise it.

Instead of exerting pressure, applying leverage, or coercing peers to comply, I could have gained their buy-in and inspired them to help out voluntarily. Perhaps I could have taken them to lunch or to get a coffee. I could have asked about their challenges. Asked what they were dealing with and how I could help them. People are smart. They will see what you’re trying to do, but most will appreciate it. It might take more time in the short term, but overall, you’ll strengthen the relationship and your project will get done faster and with higher quality. And who knows,

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Though these anecdotes aren’t empirical evidence, tons of research backs up my conclusions. The more empathetic response will bring you more powerful results. **First, empathy and curiosity increase employee loyalty and trust.** In Harvard Business Review’s Emotional Intelligence Series on Empathy, **Emma Sappala** writes, *“Research has shown that feelings of warmth and positive relationships at work have a greater say over employee loyalty than the size of their paycheck. In particular, a study by **Jonathan Haidt** of New York University shows that the more employees look up to their leaders and are moved by their empathy, the more loyal they become. So, if you deploy empathy with your employees, not only will you develop greater loyalty, but you also may develop deeper devotion to those who have witnessed your behavior.”* In another article, **Sappala** emphasizes how, conversely, responding with anger or frustration erodes loyalty. She cites **Adam Grant**, Professor at the Wharton Business School and best-selling author of *Give & Take*, who said, *“Because of the law of reciprocity, if you embarrass or blame an employee too harshly, your reaction may end up coming around to haunt you.”*






The bottom line? Neuroimaging research confirms that our brains respond positively to bosses who use empathy, compared with those who don't. Understanding your employees builds trust, which in turn improves performance. **How many conversations have you had that turned hostile?** Of those, take a moment to reflect on how you could have handled the situation differently. It's okay if you don't know the answer yet. The act of reflection will help improve future outcomes. That, and trying a few of the ideas below, which are taught in the course Empathy and Emotional Intelligence at Work, at The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, can help you disarm difficult conversations. By deploying empathy, you'll develop understanding, and then build trust.

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Reflect what others say to you by either repeating or rephrasing what they have said. If one of your employees is venting about a recent call with a client and how buried they are, you could say, *“It sounds like you had a lot going on today.”*

Probe for the feeling behind the words and validate your understanding. *“You sound exhausted. Is there something affecting you outside of work?”*

Pay attention to body language.
“You look tense. What can I do to help?”

Ask open-ended questions which will show your interest in their perspective, and soften the direct approach. Ask *“How is the project going?”* Not *“Why isn’t the project done?”*

Slow down and take a deep breath to calm yourself if you feel attacked or if you are absorbing someone else’s tension. Slowing down your emotional reactions to others can help you empathize with them, and keep you from making negative, off-the-cuff remarks.



Avoid snap judgments. Empathy means seeing people as always changing and evolving. Don't immediately jump to conclusions and shut the person down based upon past experiences, or what you think you know about the current one.

Learn from the past. If you are unaware of your own biases and often jump to conclusions, you will have trouble truly listening to people. This leads to an incorrect analysis of what they are saying. Instead, be being aware of your biases. Use cognitive reframing to shift your perspective. Like looking through the lens (or screen) of a camera, you can zoom in-and-out to change the frame. Try and take the time, after a challenging conversation, to rewind your interpretation of it. Zoom out, and see how you are conversing from an outside perspective. Then zoom in to see how everyone is reacting. Read body language, facial expressions, their tone, and vocality. This will help you to evaluate the reality of the situation versus what you might have been telling yourself about it. At the same time, you're training your brain for next time. You'll also benefit from a calmer and less emotionally exhausting experience.

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Summary

Empathy can be developed. Like any other skill, it requires time and practice. Every person is different, so we all have our own triggers that inspire and motivate us. Congratulate yourself on trying to understand them. Even when you fail.

On being held at gunpoint. Luckily, the situation deescalated quickly. Maybe it was my apathetic attitude, or maybe I got lucky. Though, as I look back at the situation, I understand the person who was holding the gun. He was scared and confused. He felt pressured into a situation that I had instigated, and I don't think he wanted it to end badly. To his credit, after some posturing, he put the gun away and abruptly left. I forgive him. And I forgive myself for having started the situation.

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