

The importance of empathy in the workplace

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Simply put, empathy is the ability to step into someone else's shoes, be aware of their feelings and understand their needs.

In the workplace, empathy can show a deep respect for co-workers and show that you care, as opposed to just going by rules and regulations. An empathic leadership style can make everyone feel like a team and increase productivity, morale and loyalty. Empathy is a powerful tool in the leadership belt of a well-liked and respected executive.

We could all take a lesson from nurses about being empathetic. Time and again, nurses rate as the most trusted profession. Why? Because they use proper empathy to make patients feel cared for and safe.

- Like people.
- Enjoy working with and helping others.
- Value people as individuals.

In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the importance of empathy in the workplace, I will pose four questions regarding the nature, role and benefits of empathy.

1. Why does it matter for us to understand the needs of others?

By understanding others we develop closer relationships.

The radar of every good executive just went off when they read the word "relationships." This is not a bad thing since most people understand the problems that happen when improper relationships are developed in the workplace.

This being said, the baby cannot be thrown out with the bath water. In order for a team of workers and their leaders to work powerfully together, proper relationships must be built and deepened.

When this happens through empathy, trust is built in the team. When trust is built, good things begin to happen.

2. What traits/behaviors distinguish someone as empathetic?

Empathy requires three things: listening, openness and understanding.

Empathetic people listen attentively to what you're telling them, putting their complete focus on the person in front of them and not getting easily distracted. They spend more time listening than talking because they want to understand the difficulties others face, all of which helps to give those around them the feeling of being heard and recognized.

Empathetic executives and managers realize that the bottom line of any business is only reached through and with people. Therefore, they have an attitude of openness towards and understanding of the feelings and emotions of their team members.

3. What role does empathy play in the workplace? Why does it matter?

When we understand our team, we have a better idea of the challenges ahead of us.

To drive home the above point, further consider these:

- Empathy allows us to feel safe with our failures because we won't simply be blamed for them.
- It encourages leaders to understand the root cause behind poor performance.
- Being empathetic allows leaders to help struggling employees improve and excel.

Empathy plays a major role in the workplace for every organization that will deal with failures, poor performance and employees who truly want to succeed. As leaders, our role is simple—deal empathetically with our team and watch them build a strong and prosperous organization.

4. So why aren't we being more empathetic at work?

Empathy takes work.

- Demonstrating empathy takes time and effort to show awareness and understanding.
- It's not always easy to understand why an employee thinks or feels the way they do about a situation.
- It means putting others ahead of yourself, which can be a challenge in today's competitive workplace.
- Many organizations are focused on achieving goals no matter what the cost to employees.

Each of these reasons can be seen as true.

Let me ask a question though: What distinguishes average to mediocre leaders from those who excel?

In my opinion, the distinction comes through the ability of the leader who actively works against all the so-called “reasons” and incorporates an attitude of empathy throughout his or her organization. That type of leader will excel.

By spending more time learning about the needs of their employees, leaders can set the tone and approach taken by their employees to achieve their organization’s goals.

When writing about empathy I am reminded of the famous quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

“Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

This is a truth that has long stood the test of time. It is true for our relationships in and out of the workplace.

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