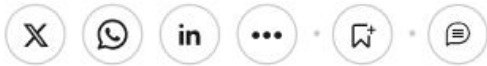


Workplace · 6 Min Read

# Leading with empathy: The new paradigm of modern leadership

Successful leaders intuitively understand and have the emotional intelligence to foster a dynamic, inclusive, and productive workplace. To them, empathy is not just a good-to-have attribute but an essential team management and personal growth skill. So, how can leaders consistently build a culture of empathy-rich workplaces?



guest author · ETHRME

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*The new paradigm of modern leadership*

By Mr Anji Maram

*"Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about caring for those in your charge." – Simon Sinek.*

Empathy has emerged as a cornerstone of effective

management in the dynamic landscape of modern leadership. It transcends traditional authoritative approaches and fosters a culture of understanding, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. Leaders at the top were once viewed as experts in their field, and employees reporting to them were expected to follow their instructions without much questioning. These hierarchical models emphasised control and a structured flow of information.

However, much has changed over the years, particularly after the pandemic. Unlike traditional top-down management styles characterised by linear thinking and limited decision-making participation, effective leadership emphasises connecting empathetically with teams on a more personal level. S

Successful leaders intuitively understand and have the emotional intelligence to foster a dynamic, inclusive, and productive workplace. To them, empathy is not just a good-to-have attribute but an essential team management and personal growth skill. They understand and relate to their team members' perspectives and feelings, building a supportive environment where individuals feel valued.

According to a survey by Catalyst (a non-profit institution that helps build women-centric workplaces), when leaders display empathy, employees are likelier to stay loyal to their organisation.

### Traits of empathetic leaders: What defines them?

Managing a team with empathy and respect for everyone also positively impacts job performance and organisational success in the long run. And the common traits displayed by such leaders are:

- **Active listening:** Leaders cultivate empathy through active listening focused on understanding, remembering, and responding to what employees say. Managers who listen actively pay attention to non-verbal cues and emotional undertones. This undivided attention of leaders signals to employees that their inputs and concerns are valued —such sensitivity fosters trust and transparency in the work environment. Active listening also nurtures problem-solving abilities as employees feel more confident identifying challenges affecting operations and the ideas to address them. They can build stronger relationships with colleagues and work collaboratively.
- **Creating a supportive environment:** As lines between personal and work life increasingly blur, empathetic leaders recognise that their team members are dynamic individuals balancing personal challenges with professional duties. By maintaining open lines of communication, they are willing to help employees resolve concerns wherever feasible. Such leaders are adept at identifying signs of overwork and burnout before they lead to disengagement or turnover. They also take an interest in each team member's unique goals and skills and try to give them relevant projects to get the best performance and employee satisfaction outcomes. In a supportive work environment, managers show compassion towards those they lead. When someone discloses a personal loss, empathetic leaders validate their feelings and ensure they feel heard and understood.

- **Constructive feedback:** Providing constructive feedback is another way of demonstrating empathy and emotional intelligence. Strong leaders offer support and guidance to help people improve and grow with feedback that is balanced, specific, and given with sensitivity to an employee's perspectives. It is framed in a way that acknowledges employees' efforts and inspires them to improve. With this approach, empathetic leaders foster a culture of continuous improvement and learning, boosting team confidence and competence and building a more productive work environment.
- **Valuing diversity and inclusion:** Valuing diversity and inclusion is an imperative. People with different backgrounds, perspectives, skills, and experiences create a rich and innovative workplace. Leaders improve team cohesion and resourcefulness by promoting an inclusive environment where everyone feels appreciated and respected. That said, valuing diversity calls for proactively looking for and leveraging different viewpoints in decision-making. Supervisors who lead with empathy also address and mitigate biases, ensuring fair treatment and equal opportunities for all. Their commitment to diversity and inclusion drives employee satisfaction and retention because employees feel genuinely appreciated and secure.
- **Leading by example:** Leaders with high emotional intelligence and genuine concern for team members demonstrate their soft skills spontaneously in their behaviour. They can manage stress effectively and keep a positive attitude despite challenging situations. Empathetic leaders lead by example, inspiring others to adopt similar behaviours. They model accountability by accepting and learning from their mistakes and setting standards for continuous improvement. Skilled leaders stay involved in their team's initiatives without micromanaging and encourage them to use innovative working methods. They motivate everyone to give their best while prioritising work-life balance and well-being. Creating a congenial work environment where team members feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns inspires trust and respect to achieve long-term success for an organisation.

## **Promoting an empathetic workplace: key strategies**

Leadership has been traditionally associated with assertiveness and the skills to make confident, autonomous decisions. While such traits project leaders as authoritative individuals, their personal and organisational growth lasts only when they embrace empathy as a superpower.

Team managers must overcome the illusion that empathy is too soft, making them vulnerable in professional work environments. It is critical to view empathy as a quality that alleviates employees' stress and nurtures creativity and productivity. Some simple strategies to build an empathetic workplace include:

- **Check-in regularly:** At a personal level, leaders should ask their team members how they're doing whenever they touch base. Connecting with them at a human level before getting into a business is a good way to nurture empathy.
- **Build customised plans for everyone:** Employees have unique capabilities and face their own challenges. Empathic managers must consider their strengths and sensitivities to make custom growth plans for them. The workplace cannot have a "one-size-fits-all" approach.
- **Sharing failures and feelings:** Team leaders can use social media platforms to share their stories about failures, setbacks, and how they addressed challenges, showing their human side and inspiring others.
- **Keep an open-door policy:** Leaders who make their phone numbers and email IDs available down the hierarchy demonstrate empathy in corporate environments.
- **Consider workload and burnout:** Overwork is a serious issue. Beyond fatigue and stress, it affects productivity and the quality of work and may lead to attrition. Leaders must always stay alert for burnout, encouraging time off and, if necessary, hiring more staff.
- **Demonstrate values through action:** A key to expressing empathy is active listening, which assures people of their manager's full attention when their concerns are heard. The listening must be followed by quick action to address concerns. Leaders can promote an empathic workplace by promoting a family-first attitude, time off to care for sick family members or bereavement leave.

Leaders can consistently build a culture of empathy-rich workplaces by becoming good listeners, understanding how their choices impact others, and combining empathy with compassion.

### **The timeless power of empathy in leadership**

Empathy is not a new soft skill; it has long been valued as an ethical quality. However, its importance has surged in today's high-stress work environment, where people are constantly connected to family, friends, and colleagues, and struggle to balance personal goals with job duties. Empathy is a leadership trait that must be developed and demonstrated now to create a sustainable future of work.

#### **About the author:**

Mr Anji Maram is the founder and CEO of CriticalRiver Inc. He enjoys writing insightful content that inspires leaders to foster innovation, drive sustainable growth, and navigate the complexities of business transformation with confidence.

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