TRAINING & LEARNING

Creating a Culture of Understanding

Daniel Goleman, the distinguished author who popularized the components of emotional intelligence, put it best in his 1995 book "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ" when he said, "If you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far." This sentiment still proves true. Being empathetic and truly "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" is not just important in fostering positive personal relationships, it's vital for the smooth operation of organisations across sectors.

Mind Tools defines empathy as *"the ability to identify and understand another's situation, feelings and motives."* Empathy is in high demand among both employees and employers. According to Businesssolver's 2019 "State of Workplace Empathy" study, 90% of employees say they're more likely to stay with an empathetic employer, and 87% of CEOs believe empathy is linked to financial performance.

Dr. Helen Riess, director of the Empathy and Relational Science Programme at Massachusetts General Hospital and associate clinical professor at Harvard Medical School, has devoted her time, energy and research to the subject of empathy. More specifically, she investigates whether empathy can be taught and after extensive research, she found that it can.

Empathy in the workplace sets the tone that people matter. A culture of empathy gives people the benefit of the doubt that they are probably doing their best and, if for some reason they're not, it seeks to understand what might be impeding good performance before judging or punishing. Learning and Development professionals can help leaders develop this keen sense of understanding by encouraging them to get to know their team members and their unique strengths and weaknesses on a deeper level.

Empathy in the workplace can also help increase both individual and team performance, and it starts with leadership. The purpose of the leader is to lead people! Often, we talk about leaders leading organisations, but organisations are made up of people and, in order to keep employees engaged, productive, feeling positive, and collaborating and cooperating with others, they need to be treated that way by their leaders. The leaders set the tone for how people are treated in an organization.

Empathetic leaders also play a role in increasing employee engagement among team members. Having an empathetic leader energizes a team, makes them want to come to work, and makes people feel like they're all in it for the good of each other and the good of the mission.

Making a genuine human connection is the first step in creating empathy. The second step is learning an individual's hidden story. Without listening to what's most important or urgent to others, without knowing their story, we're not going to have empathy for them.

While leading with empathy does require a greater focus on human connection and understanding, it doesn't have to be a chore. Demonstrating empathy can be as simple as making eye contact with a visibly distressed team member from across the room or actively listening to others, not just with your ears, but with your eyes and heart too.

Therefore, training leaders in active listening skills, such as asking questions, offering verbal and nonverbal feedback to show signs of listening, and summarizing, is another way L&D professionals can help leaders become more empathetic.

For leaders, creating a culture of empathy means acknowledging the individual emotions and experiences of team members, which, in turn, increases trust and drives better business results.

Additionally, knowing that you're cared about as a whole person can be more important than a salary increase for some employees. As a result, if you have a team that is engaged at that level, you really can't help but have a better bottom line because everybody's all in.

By helping leaders develop critical active listening skills, build a greater understanding of individual team members and create a more supportive work culture, L&D professionals are well positioned to help leaders become more empathetic and, as a result, drive lasting organisational change.

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