

# Opinion: Empathy is more critical than ever

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What does empathy have to do with the success of your leaders? Your people? Your company? More than ever, as leaders build more diverse teams, face disruptive change and plan for growth in uncertain times, empathy is one of the most valuable strengths they can bring to the table.

Whatever the industry, market or mission, intentional empathy is important for several reasons. As the accelerating pace of change across the business world throws leaders off balance at a time they're expected to be faster and bolder, empathy fosters equilibrium and equanimity. As companies strive to recruit more diverse talent, empathy strengthens new connections and understanding.

Leaders need to be deliberate in connecting with and understanding the people they support. You can't fake it, check the "empathy" box, and move on. There is no step-by-step process to make it happen, and it's tough to measure when it does. It's up to leaders to embrace empathy and inspire it in others. Here's how.

**Lead with curiosity.** Many leaders go into conversations with an agenda. Instead, put your agenda aside and take the time to find out where people are coming from. What's on their minds? What do they most want to achieve? Find out what matters and call it to the forefront.

**Open yourself to a 360 view.** To get the fullest perspective, apply personas to look at an issue through multiple angles. For example, if you're thinking about a new training program, consider what that program looks like to someone new to your company as well as one of your long-term employees. What would adding a new practice area mean to your company in the short- and long-term? Think through an issue by using various lenses to unlock a broader perspective.

**Validate others.** Validation is not only about listening, it's also about playing back what you've heard and showing you value other's input enough to factor it into your decision making.

**Model the behavior you want to see.** Be consistent in modeling empathy. Every time you walk into a meeting, join a conversation or make a decision, be clear about what you want and what's most important. Open the door for feedback and give people space to offer their ideas and opinions.

**Show that it's OK to be vulnerable.** It's tough for empathy to be present in a work environment that doesn't accept vulnerability and failure. When problems arise, going down the "why" path can quickly turn into blaming and defensive behaviors that shut down dialogue. Empathy goes beyond "why" to ask "what" and "how." What did you learn along the way? How would you do things next time?

**Lead with heart.** It means caring about others and commitment to what matters most to them. Business is never just about business. It's about people — the stakeholders and leaders you're working with.

For many companies, intentional empathy is new. If you're looking to introduce it into your leadership team, try incorporating it into a familiar activity. For example, bring curiosity to your quarterly business reviews to get a broader view: "What did we learn this quarter? Where were we strong? Where can we improve? How do we use what we learned going forward?"

Finally, remember to have empathy for yourself. Understanding and caring for your own needs is good for everyone around you. Intentional empathy recognizes that no one is perfect, and no successes are solo acts. Just as you need to be there for others, you also need others to be their best.