

Empathy-fueled Engines of Well-being

Description

“We can build workplaces that are engines of well-being, showing workers that they matter, that their work matters, and that they have the workplace resources and support necessary to flourish.” Dr. Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon General

In late 2022, the U.S. Surgeon General’s office published a [framework for workplace mental health and well-being](#), urging U.S. workplaces to be “engines of well-being”. This publication was launched after research suggested a very stressed and anxious state of the post-COVID U.S. workforce. And more than 80% of folks surveyed said they’ll be searching for organizations who support their mental health and well-being in the future, so as business leaders, we should pay attention. The framework aims to meet 10 basic human needs for employees. Throughout 2023, I referenced this framework from stage, often met with audience unfamiliarity. My focus was on promoting holistic coaching, but coaching is just the conduit to human connection that I was referencing. Another, that is absolutely necessary and too often missing, is **empathic leadership**.

Remember the old rhyme we used to be told as kids when someone hurt our feelings, *sticks & stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me*.? Contrary to the childhood adage, words **do** hold weight. As leaders, acknowledging the impact of our words is pivotal. Cultivating empathy as a leadership competency may encourage leaders to be more mindful of their language with team members. I’d like to share a personal example of a missed opportunity for empathy.

I recently had an encounter which left me feeling utterly insulted. The words said to me were almost positioned as if meant to be providing helpful feedback, but it was unwarranted and certainly unsolicited. The words were spoken with a complete lack of empathy, and came from a place of sincere ignorance around mental health. After I got over the initial shock of the experience (it had caught me way off guard), I debated whether I should turn the experience into a coaching moment by writing a blog about the importance of empathy in leadership and what that looks like. I was on the fence. However, it was a former colleague who confided in me that she had a similar experience last week who convinced me this topic needed addressing.

I lived with anxiety and depression privately most of my life; about a decade ago, I chose to be more vulnerable, open and transparent about my mental health to help bust unfair stigma-based preconceptions in business leadership. Unfortunately, this recent incident reminded me of the persisting stigma around mental health. Sharing my story with a smart successful business leader, I found it perceived as a weakness and a distraction due to their lack of understanding or desire to *seek to understand*? empathy. The example I shared occurred outside of a reporting structure, but the individual is a business leader. It made me wonder how they must communicate with their employees. And it got me thinking about the Surgeon General’s call to action and what role I can play as a coach to help cultivate empathic leadership in our workplaces.

I had been observing an ego-driven approach in this leader, in both life and leadership, which led me to realize empathy and ego are incompatible. While ego may drive career advancement, it obstructs

empathy. The Surgeon General's call for workplaces to champion mental health hinges on empathic and compassionate leadership. Without these qualities, dismissiveness prevails, hindering intentional and empathetic communication. **To truly be engines of mental health and well-being, organizations must be led by compassionate individuals who seek to understand experiences they may not share.** Empathy and compassion foster trust, connection, and ultimately drive engagement and productivity. Here are a few questions to ponder around this topic and perhaps to set some intentions around for this new year!

As a leader, how intentionally do you consider the impact of your words on your team members' well-being and mental health?

Reflect on a time when you faced a challenge in understanding a colleague's perspective or struggles. How did you approach it, and what might you do differently in the future?

In what ways do you foster a culture of openness and vulnerability in your team? How does this contribute to a supportive environment for mental health?

Consider your leadership style. Does ego sometimes overshadow your ability to empathize with your team members? How might you balance ambition with empathy?

Have you ever experienced a situation where you were on the receiving end of a leader's insensitive words? How did it affect you, and what measures could the leader have taken to demonstrate empathy?

As you envision your organization, do you see it as an engine for mental health and well-being? What steps can you personally take to contribute to this vision?

Imagine your team members reflecting on your leadership. What would you want them to say about the role of empathy in your leadership style and its impact on their overall well-being?

Category

1. Career
2. Leadership
3. Life

Tags

1. compassion
2. do better
3. ego is the enemy
4. empathic leadership
5. empathy
6. mental health
7. seek to understand

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