

Leading with Empathy

Description

“This is bigger than just me. This is the Olympic Games and it’s about Team USA and giving everybody the opportunity to showcase what they got.”

U.S. Speedskater, Brittany Bowe

The spirit of the Olympics & Paralympics is in the air again, folks! Leaders should watch the Games every couple of years with pen and paper in hand, as some of our greatest lessons in leadership come through the camaraderie and sportsmanship displayed by these remarkable athletes. I had planned to write a post this month about the role of empathy in leadership, then I learned of [this story](#) and knew it would be the perfect complement. Today’s leadership lesson comes from Team USA Speedskater and our honorary flag bearer for these Beijing Olympics, Brittany Bowe. Going into the Olympic trials held in December, Erin Jackson was the person to beat in the 500m; no. 1 in the world. At the start of the race, Jackson slipped and ultimately failed to qualify for the Olympic team finishing third in the race. Teammate Brittany Bowe (whom Jackson had previously named her hero), had won the qualifying race, but gave up her spot in the 500m Olympic event in order to allow Jackson to take the spot she had earned race after race in the years leading up to the Games. Class act move, Brittany Bowe.

Over the past few years experiencing a global pandemic has required empathetic leadership more than ever. During the toughest stretch of a sudden and unplanned-for “work from home” environment, a frustrated leader asked me, *now we have to have empathy too?* The tone used translated to me as if to say, *how many leadership competencies do I need?* The bad news I had for that leader is, **empathy should have always been a brick in your leadership foundation.** Toddlers and cats making an appearance in most if not all Zoom calls, an increase in mental health issues due to uncertainty, fear, or isolation, (etc.) these trials of COVID-19 are not what triggered the idea that empathy is essential for transformational leadership. Transformational leaders have the ability to put themselves in the shoes of, and understand the emotions of others. Leaders empathize and show support even if they don’t understand. Practicing cognitive empathy (thinking about how you would *think* if you were in their shoes) or emotional empathy (thinking about how you would *feel*), is only the first step in a vital two- (or multi-) step process. The next step must be **expressing** what you’ve been thinking in your words and actions. These lessons we can see in elite sport, like the actions of Brittany Bowe, are transferable to executive and leadership settings. When your teammate falls, do you reach out a hand to help them up, or blow past them to come in first? As a leader, do you give everybody the opportunity to showcase what they’ve got?

Leaders eat last.

(Go Team USA!)



Category

1. Leadership

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