

The Power of Real Empathy in Leadership Is Not “Being Nice”

Jacqueline Acho

Do you struggle to engage your employees as a leader or to find inspiration at work under a bad leader? Perhaps you have heard the recent buzz about “empathy at work,” but what does that really mean? How can this soft skill have any real impact? I can relate to these questions.

Empathy was not my professional starting point. I earned my doctorate in chemistry at MIT in 1994 and was elected a partner of McKinsey and Company in 2000. I was energized by some of the best science in the world and had many wonderful C-suite, Fortune 500 clients through the years. All of that was nourishing and enriching. Although empathy was important for teaching and client service, those are not the experiences which helped me remember and develop the superpower of empathy as an adult. I profoundly relearned empathy when I became a parent—one of the many opportunities to lean into learning about life beyond work. It turns out one of the best ways to grow empathy is to live a whole life.

Of course, you do not have to become a parent to be empathetic, but there are two times during which our neural networks are especially wired for developing empathy: during early childhood and when parenting very young children. It makes sense that empathy is the tool we need the most when we do not have words—when we, ourselves, are preverbal or are trying to understand if a baby is hot, cold, hungry, or wet when he cannot speak to us.¹ This central and foundational empathy is often referred to as *emotional* or *affective empathy*. It is the most ancient form of empathy, which we share with other mammals like chimpanzees, bonobos, and elephants.² The second part of empathy to develop is called *cognitive* or *imaginative empathy*.³ Cognitive empathy is the form we use when we are trying to mentally put ourselves in someone else’s shoes. It is important that our cognitive and affective empathy are in communication, but our education, work, and society often put them at odds. That is part of why growing in leadership is all too often an empathy-sapping experience.

Climbing the leadership ladder typically means sacrificing the time and experiences outside of work that grow both parts of empathy. How many CEOs do you know who were able to be engaged parents or caregivers for elderly parents, much less take care of themselves in a way that promoted and modeled good mental and physical health? Our systems do not support that kind of development in workers, much less leaders. The US ranks last in the developed world for paid parental leave.⁴ Last. The US also ranks near the bottom for work-family balance across the globe.⁵ Rising in leadership can be a lonely experience—a product of fierce competition and long hours on the job, not so much in relationship with others but ever more isolating. Once at the top, we further separate leaders by expecting them to be all-knowing, superhuman mind-readers. Fearing the consequences of delivering bad news, we resist telling bosses the truth, handicapping their ability to lead. Furthermore, leaders often have to tell themselves stories that justify shutting down affective empathy and conscience in the face of dehumanizing actions (e.g., excessive cost-cutting, overworking employees, topgrading employees), saying it is “good for business” or at least “looks good in the short term,” during which most CEOs are evaluated. So, the organizational hierarchies we build end up being pointy pyramids that make uncomfortable seats for leaders, triggering self-preservation rather than grace, generosity, humanity, and empathic development.

So how can we retain empathy and even develop it as a superpower as we grow in leadership? These are questions I started probing more seriously when I started my own strategy, leadership, and cultural transformation consulting firm. Can you fake it till you make it? Does the style from the top trickle down? If someone does not have empathy, can you “train” it into them?

Retaining and growing empathy as we grow in leadership requires a wholesale rethinking of leadership and leadership development. So many of our business practices dehumanize us and the people we serve, whether they are employees or customers. The rationale is that being dispassionate is good for business and necessary for profit. But is it really? How is it going? Are we achieving our ultimate goals?

Are we as innovative as we want to be? A common measure of innovation—total factor productivity—has been growing at a snail’s pace, especially when compared to the glory years of the 1950s, so people wonder if we are out of big ideas.⁶ Innovation is also an overused word; not all of it is even good. Great innovation is not formulating the next snack chip laced with sugar and MSG that makes us sick and addicted—no matter how much revenues grow. Great innovation is also not repurposing old drugs to medicate our

children so that they can sit still during standardized school testing rather than learn in their own styles, at their own pace, inspired from the inside-out. How about the robots that will keep us company in the Alzheimer's unit one day, while our loved ones are busy elsewhere? Maybe they will be on vacation in space by then, since we are making terrific progress on commuter spacecraft—while one in five children in the US is hungry. If we honestly examine our innovations, we have to admit we are not the leaders we hope to be.

How is it going with true diversity and inclusion? Not so well either. Leadership is still dominated by white men, despite all of the hard work of the feminist revolution and civil rights. The leadership pipeline remains leaky for women.⁷ Even the NFL had only three Black coaches in 2020, while 70% of the players were African American.⁸

I have found that empathy is the missing link to the innovation and true inclusion we seek, and we have underinvested in this valuable currency for too long. We have not accounted for the externalities of our lack of empathy for future generations and the planet in our accounting books either.

My experience would suggest we can do three things to help leaders grow with empathy: (1) change the way we develop leaders; (2) change the way we practice work and life integration (beyond old notions of “balance”); and (3) invest time and effort, not even so much money, in developing an organizational, cultural currency of empathy. I have done all of this work with clients in the last decade, whether with for-profit companies, a world-class orchestra, a top-notch university, or the Cleveland police. In all of these cases, payoff has been in the end goals that matter most to each organization, such as with the police, where our work drove a 29% decrease in use-of-force, a 45% decrease in citizen complaints, and more than half of the transfers within the department into the district where we started the work. Growing the “soft skill” of empathy has tangible, real-world impact. If the police can grow in empathy, you can too. It shouldn't be so surprising that aligning organizations with what people need energizes them to do the work they are there to do. Most of these changes do not cost a lot. Some cost nothing. It's about looking at work and doing it differently—treating people like people again.

1. **We need to change the way we do leadership development,** making a topic which is usually subjective and mysterious, objective and clear, and anchoring rewards (and punishments) in behaviors that exhibit empathy and humanity (or lack thereof).

In my experience, most organizations get it wrong. McKinsey & Company, one of the top sources of Fortune 500 CEOs, had a disciplined approach which turned reviews into a simple process for anyone, empathetic or not. We adapted this five-part leadership model to the Cleveland police, focusing on the areas that matter most and centering them in empathy: community leadership (because service is the ultimate goal), people leadership (because, like most, the job is ultimately an apprenticeship), vision for policing of the future (since the field needs reimagining), entrepreneurial leadership (the courage to change, even in a top-down paramilitary organization), and administrative leadership (because turning a huge ship requires knowing how to steer it). We clearly defined what unacceptable, good, better, and best looked like in each category and anchored best behaviors in empathy.

We started small, testing the model in new positions such as on our innovation teams. Unqualified success there made it natural to roll out the model to the rest of the Cleveland Police Department. Hiring, firing, promoting, and celebrating people with a clear, logical model anchored in empathy does many important things. It gives people goals and security in their professional development and leaves no room for zero empathy, psychopathic behaviors throughout the department and out in the community.

2. We need to change the way we integrate work and life.

One positive outcome of the COVID pandemic is a realization that our work and personal lives are not really two separate existences. They never have been, even as we pretended it was so. We are the same people—fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, friends . . . with caregiving responsibilities and personal needs—at home and at work. No matter how we try to fit into the norms established by a relatively few, largely privileged white men at the top (forever), our gender, race, economic backgrounds, and sexual orientations are what they are. Trying to leave our identities behind was always problematic, resulting in a handful of people with limited experiences deciding what was best for all of us, causing us to check out of work emotionally if not physically. How do we know? Globally 80% of employees are disengaged

at work—disengaged in most of our waking hours! This result is both bad for business and very sad for us personally.

A good starting point is to admit that we waste each other's time far too often and can trust each other to manage our own time much better. Trust is built not by proximity but by honest, empathetic conversations, and shared experiences. The four-day workweek is gaining momentum across the globe,⁹ with good reason. Technology has made working remotely entirely possible, and many of us learned some new things about blending home and work during the COVID pandemic, so long as we use technology to save time rather than letting technology use us up. It is not always easy, especially for people with caregiving responsibilities at home (e.g., parents of young children doing remote school and/or who have special needs), but saving time on commutes, unnecessary meetings, and busy work opens up time to do what is needed at home. Cooking meals. Eating together. Offering a safe, empathetic presence. Fitting in meditation. Getting some exercise. Sleeping adequately. Empathy is selfish first and starts at home.

Taking good care is also good for business. Showing up on a Zoom call with a clear agenda and goals and time for each person to be heard feels much more productive if you are not distracted by poor health and/or worried about your home and the people in it. So much of this is obvious. How did we forget? As we come back to work and spend more time together in offices, may we keep the best of the lessons we learned throughout the pandemic. Even without a pandemic, we are all in this together.

3. **We need to invest time and effort—orienting our cultures and organizational practices—to steward a currency of empathy.** We have overcomplicated organizational/cultural development, forgetting what we need most is to treat people like people instead of cogs in a machine. So many of our business practices dehumanize us, which may make people more productive for a short time, but is unsustainable and hurts our trust, our ability to listen to others who are different from us, and the chance we will do anything special together, such as achieve organic innovation.

It is simple really. People need three things to feel good about their work:

- a. **Meaning.** Meaning comes from doing something together that is bigger than we can do alone. Yes, we work to make a living, but how much more inspiring it is to somehow, someday, make the world a better place for even one customer, one client, or one coworker?
- b. **Personal Growth.** We evolve and grow, or we stagnate and die, including emotionally. When work is a consistent source of learning, supported challenges, and opportunities, it is a far more engaging endeavor.
- c. **The chance to bring our whole selves to work.** Bringing our whole selves to work has a lot to do with flexibility, physically and emotionally. Organizations that allow employees to flex time, as appropriate for their jobs, and value the perspectives they bring from the various facets of life outside of work, win loyalty, engagement, and a shot at true diversity, inclusion, and innovation that reflects *all* constituents.

Meeting our fundamental needs often requires rethinking our business practices, dropping the ones that are not serving human beings anymore, even if your Harvard MBA endorsed them. Competing employees. Fearful leadership. Cutting costs to the bone and making the employees left behind work crazy hours to meet production goals. Making decisions that save money now or push addictive and unhealthy products (do we really need Jacked Doritos?), destroy the environment, and bankrupt future generations. These tactics may have worked in the short-term to briefly inflate share prices or make legends out of “tough” CEOs (remember “Chainsaw” Al Dunlop?), but do any of us really see them as courageous or brilliant anymore? Not by a long shot. Hindsight is clear. Investing in organizational meaning, personal growth, and letting employees bring their whole selves to work is what we need. It is simple, even if it is not always easy to change.

Leading with empathy is not about being nice, but rather getting these fundamentals right for the people whose work lives you have a responsibility and privilege to steward.

Back to some of the earlier questions. Can you fake it till you make it? In my experience, it is better than not trying and can create some momentum.

Does the leadership style from the top trickle down? Absolutely. Empathy really is a currency that flows. The more you give, the more you get, and it intuitively feels good, so empathy is self-reinforcing. Empathy is not just about shared pain, but also joy and every other emotion. Stifling humanity by leading with fear is a sure killer for organizational empathy and humanity. If someone does not have empathy, can you “train” it into her? This question is tricky. There are certainly people making lots of money promising “empathy training,” but what can be learned in a day or a week? Usually, it is cognitive empathy or perspective taking. Without the appropriate changes to make space for affective empathy development, this lopsided empathy development is too often used for persuading, or worse, manipulating customers and/or employees. Do you know who has outstanding cognitive empathy but zero affective empathy according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)? Psychopaths.

The ripple effects of empathy—or lack thereof—connect many dots we have been trying to address separately, such as the number of women and African Americans in leadership positions, stagnant innovation statistics that would flourish if teams would really trust each other, and even some of the broader societal challenges like the political divisions we have sown in the last several years. We do not have to agree with each other to empathize, but by empathizing we are likely to find we have more in common than we thought. Empathy starts with recognizing our own triggers, overcoming them, and being able to listen to others, especially those who are different from us. Empathizing with future generations would orient our businesses to produce products that are better for our bodies and the planet. That would be progress. Our children would be less justifiably worried about their future.

These are big dreams. Is empathy really this powerful? It kept you alive when you were a baby. It’s been a big part of how humanity has progressed collectively throughout the millennia. We have tried so many ways to fix all of our seemingly disparate modern problems. Yet, so many persist. What have we got to lose by giving empathy its due? Wherever and whenever we organize ourselves into hierarchies, whatever is at the top flows down, including empathy and humanity.

Great leaders have a vital role to play, and empathy can be their super-power.

Notes

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3. For a full explanation of the state of science and the empathy circuit, check out Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 17–43.
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7. “Women in Management: Quick Take,” March 1, 2022, <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-management/>.
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