

THE CASE FOR COMPASSION

Compassion is a key part of the empathy puzzle that people are often overlooking.

Thought Leadership



In the past year, have you had a chat with a manager or colleague where you could tell they understood your challenges, but didn't connect with you emotionally, and you felt alone in your hardship?

Or how about a conversation where you could tell your colleague or manager felt your pain, but it quickly became about their struggle instead of your story?

Although the crises of 2020 have highlighted the power of empathetic leadership, these examples of incomplete empathy have become all too familiar in recent months. They have left us feeling unseen, unheard, or alone—if not all three.

Empathy has three slightly, but crucially different dimensions: cognitive empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Each dimension activates different regions of the brain, yielding different kinds of behavior. Despite their specialized knowledge and competencies, many executives do not fully appreciate this true complexity of empathy.

This is often because the interpersonal dynamics of leadership—understanding, empathy, listening skills—are less developed: a 2016 Korn Ferry study of nearly 80,000 professionals found a notable gap between leaders' self-evaluation of their empathy skills and the evaluations from their team members, suggesting leaders may think they are more empathetic than others perceive them to be.

Our ability to accurately perceive our own empathetic skills is part of a larger construct of emotional intelligence. Our capacity for empathy is related to our sense of self, including self-knowledge and self-regulation. It is challenging to authentically help others process their emotional experiences—both positive and negative—if

we have not yet worked through our own emotional journeys.

These processes can take us by surprise; our emotions can hijack our empathetic intentions to carry out self-related functions. Sometimes, the first step to pardon, grieve, care for, listen to, forgive, and celebrate others is to pardon, grieve, care for, listen to, forgive, and celebrate ourselves.

Many executives have used work, busy agendas, and the intense external demands of their lives as reasons not embark on these critical, yet challenging, self-explorations. Early on, the pandemic forced everyone to pause and face fears—our own and those of others. Perhaps this was a result of isolation. Or perhaps, it was a feeling like we all had something in common, which encouraged us to be a little more honest, both with and about ourselves. In response, candor, followed by empathy and compassion, increased dramatically.

Now, as many of us look to return to life as we knew it before the pandemic, this increased empathy has begun to dissipate. But without empathy, we are likely to withdraw from tough conversations and disengage from difficult decisions—the kinds of situations leaders face every day, outside of crisis.

And it's not just leaders who suffer when there is a lack of empathy: the same 2016 survey shows that empathy is one of the strongest predictors of team climate and employee retention, thus,

becoming a bottom-line issue for an organization—not the cherry on top.

Empathy, in other words, is as important at work as it is at home. It is crucial for successful social interactions and perhaps, even the success of our institutions, as it plays a critical role in developing skills like negotiation, collaboration, creativity, emotional connection, social awareness, and perspective taking, to name a few (Decety, 2010). Empathetic leaders reassure us that our concerns will be heard and valued—even if we are not there—fostering a culture of trust (Wageman et al., 2008). But in the absence of multidimensional empathy, even the best efforts at relationship skills tend to miss the mark.

Still, many people fail to understand empathy in its entirety. It is not as simple as feeling sorry for people who are having a tough time or understanding the hardships of others. Empathy is a multidimensional construct that can be measured and developed. The most effective leaders pay attention to the nuances of empathy, actively working to develop their empathetic and interpersonal skills across all dimensions.

Empathy, unpacked

Cognitive empathy, sympathy, and compassion—the three components of empathy—follow separate developmental processes, underpinned by complex, distributed neural networks. These networks connect various parts of the brain involved in processing emotional information (the insula, amygdala, and anterior cingulate cortex), thinking about ourselves (the postcingulate cortex), and putting ourselves in the shoes of others (the right temporoparietal junction, medial prefrontal cortex, and precuneus).

Cognitive empathy lets us understand the emotional perspective and experience of others while maintaining a healthy detachment. Cognitive empathy requires no sympathetic feelings. It is supported by the regions of the brain involved in Theory of Mind—that is, the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes—and affective processing, as well as representing the non-emotional beliefs and intentions of others.

Sympathy, or emotional empathy, lets us feel what another person is feeling. This is important—but it has its limitations. When the suffering of another person is too great, we tune out. Sympathy activates circuits centering on parts of the insula—a set of interconnected regions of the brain that light up when we ourselves are

Empathy in action.

Imagine you are in a meeting with a direct report who has seemed a little distracted. They made a small mistake on a recent project—nothing too serious, but you want to know where their head is and why it is not 100 percent in the game. When you address the issue, your employee dissolves, explaining the massive increase in responsibility at home they have taken on during the pandemic, the worry they have for the health of their family, and the newfound difficulties their children are having with hybrid learning.

The cognitive empathetic response: Your employee is upset, and you're determined to give them answers. After all, it's your job to know. You put your thinking cap on, then say: *"It's a tough time for sure, but in the grand scheme of things we are really lucky. We didn't have to lay off nearly as many employees as our competitors and we've got a really excellent benefits program. If something does happen to you, we've got you covered."*

The sympathetic response: You flash back to this morning. Your partner was busy. Your child spilled orange juice all over their tablet. A delivery man at the door needed a signature. The board waited for a response to a question you didn't even hear. You know exactly how your employee is feeling. You respond: *"I know exactly how you feel. This has been an incredibly difficult time for everybody, myself included, and I just don't have answers yet. But we're all in this together."*

The compassionate response: You give your employee a minute to collect their emotions. You let them say everything they need to say before you respond. You try to imagine the experiences they have described, but don't stop to ruminate on your own challenges—keeping yourself separate from their pain. Finally, you say: *"I know what a difficult time this has been. I know asking you to carry on as though everything is normal is an unimaginable thing. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you continuing to show up and work hard. I'd like to brainstorm together ways we can support you and the team."*

suffering or in pain. The brain processes the state of the victims' pain as first-person pain—what is known as secondary trauma. So, when their suffering becomes too intense, we protect ourselves and our feelings, reducing the likelihood of compassionate action.

Compassion, or empathetic care, is about care and concern for others. Compassion activates a set of brain regions involved in feelings of warmth, love, concern, reward, and affiliation. Highly compassionate people exhibit stronger connections between the postcingulate cortex—a key area for self-focused thought—and the prefrontal cortex. This suggests that, to focus on others, they are more capable of quieting areas of their brain that focus on themselves.

The missing puzzle piece

There are [about 490,000 scholarly articles](#) on the web exploring empathy and leadership—roughly 70,000 more than ones related to compassion and leadership. Of those articles on compassionate leadership, most seem to focus on care-related jobs, such as nursing or hospice work. Empathetic leadership, on the other hand, seems to be considered in the context of business more broadly.

As this dichotomy illustrates, compassion may be the key part of the empathy puzzle that we too often overlook. After all, many conceptualizations of empathy tend to be incomplete, focusing on one of its components over others. And those that do often concentrate on sympathy—feeling *with* rather than feeling *for*. This can often lead to sympathy fatigue, in which our brains will short-circuit to protect ourselves from secondary trauma. Sympathy fatigue, as research shows, is common among first responders and healthcare workers facing chronic exposure to traumatic events—a trend that increased exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

True empathy, however, requires a combination of these components—and in the right balance. Indeed, focusing on sympathy can be too painful; according to studies, those who engage most strongly with sympathy are actually less likely to exhibit prosocial behavior. It can also result in fatigue or distress, paradoxically shutting down the helping response that we hope empathy would foster.

But when we focus on cognitive empathy—that is, understanding, but remaining detached, from the emotions of others—we can miss the opportunity to connect with our peers on a critical personal level. It can make us seem cold and callous.

Understanding people's emotional experience without the capacity or willingness to feel with or for them will not result in strong interpersonal skills. Only when we combine cognitive empathy with sympathy and compassion will our connections feel more complete.

The dark side of human nature

Empathetic responses are controlled by various factors, including person-specific characteristics like age, race, or gender. Because there is overlap in the neural networks for other-oriented and self-oriented suffering, our degree of empathy may be influenced by how much “they” are “like us.” Perceived group membership may influence how much empathy we will feel towards another person.

Further, the strength of this empathy-related neurological response predicts the degree of helping behaviors further down the line. The reduced ability to empathize with people we may perceive as “outsiders” can contribute to interpersonal conflict.

The case for compassion.

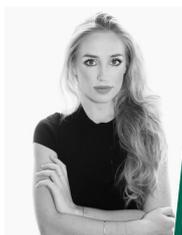
Compassion is one piece of the larger empathy puzzle. When we practice compassion in an intentional, active way, we develop the neural circuits that enable us to feel care, love and warmth for our children, friends, and neighbors.

On an individual level, mindful compassion can decrease negative emotions and increase positive emotions. On an interpersonal level, compassion is highly prosocial: studies show that practicing compassion triggers increased connectivity between the right amygdala—part of the brain associated with negative emotion—and the prefrontal cortex, thus increasing the likelihood that someone will help others, even at a personal cost. In fact, researchers have found that people

who actively practice compassion give almost twice as much away in resource redistribution exercises as compared to people who do not actively practice compassion. The prefrontal cortex quiets the activated amygdala response to facilitate thoughtful, mindful, deliberate action.

Training a person to be compassionate versus empathetic results in unique changes to separate neural networks. Compassion training develops the neurological link between the brain areas associated with sympathy and cognitive empathy. It makes it possible for us to connect with the emotional experiences of others without being overwhelmed by feelings or jumping straight into problem-solving mode. Practicing compassion may reflect a new strategy to overcome empathic distress, boost resilience, uphold common good, strengthen relationships, and engage with others on a radically human level.

Effective leaders understand that in order to build deep, meaningful relationships, they need to actively practice compassion. Relying solely on either cognitive empathy and sympathy can be misguided, misinterpreted, or just simply miss the mark. Think of empathy like aiming an arrow blindfolded: even if you have a good bow and a strong arm, neither would do you much good. On the other hand, bridging the two can help us listen, imagine, and empathize all at once and find the more helpful compassionate response.



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