

SIGMA EI Series



**Great Leaders
Act With Empathy**



GREAT LEADERS ACT WITH EMPATHY

“ Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another.”

- Alfred Adler

Empathy may be considered a “soft” skill by some but there are many measurable benefits to being empathetic. In the workplace, some of these benefits include improved leadership, teamwork, innovation, and motivation.¹ Furthermore, given the rapid changes in technology and globalization, employees are needing to build and maintain more relationships than ever. In this new work environment, empathy is no longer an optional part of being an effective leader.² Employees with empathetic managers experience greater well-being than employees with less empathetic leaders³ and are at a lower risk of burning out.⁴ As relational beings, showing empathy in your interactions with others is a critical part of being a strong leader and an effective manager.

Empathizing with others involves noticing how someone is feeling and feeling with them. Empathy can be contrasted with sympathy, which is when you acknowledge the challenges someone is experiencing without imagining yourself in their shoes. When we empathize, we help others feel less alone, something sympathy does not do. Thanks to the power of our imagination, we can empathize with others even if we have not experienced what they are going through. If you work with people in almost any capacity, being more empathetic will improve your relationships and ability to get things done. By contrast, if you are not regularly connecting and empathizing with others you may experience a lack of trust and cooperation.

In assessing your tendency to empathize with others, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I pay attention to how I’m feeling and put it into words?
- When someone else is talking, do I let go of what I want to say and really listen?
- Do I regularly check in with my colleagues and direct reports?
- Am I likely to repeat what someone is saying to make sure I understand them correctly?
- Do I try to understand how people different from me feel?

Improve Your Empathy

Be curious: Adopting an attitude of curiosity can help you learn about others. What are their lives like? What are they feeling? Curiosity will help you to ask questions, listen to what people have to say, and build stronger, more authentic relationships.

Avoid or reduce multitasking: When you're multitasking (for instance, by writing an email while someone is talking to you) you're losing valuable information as well as making the person feel like you don't want to hear what they have to say. When you're in a conversation or meeting try your best to focus on what others are sharing and if you lose focus, apologize, and try again.

Identify your biases: We all have biases, but we are usually not aware of them until someone points them out. Biases are personal preferences, tendencies, or assumptions that may skew decision making away from the objective. To identify your biases, start paying attention to how your surroundings, relationships, past experiences, and demographic characteristics may be influencing your thoughts and decisions. Doing so can improve your ability to relate to and be more inclusive of people who are different from you.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to be More Empathetic

The following steps can help you improve your ability to be empathetic towards others:

1. **Avoid common empathy traps.** Most people want to make others feel better when they're sharing something difficult, but this tendency can have the opposite effect. Encouraging others to feel better without really listening to them, may cause them to feel unseen or unheard. Be aware of this tendency in your interactions with others and try to avoid saying things like "Well, at least..." or "It could be worse." Other common empathy traps include trying to fix the problem or suggest solutions, especially when all the other person needs at that moment is to feel heard and understood. Do your best to be an active listener, express empathy, and ask questions before you offer advice.
2. **Get lost in others' worlds.** Reading fiction is a proven way to increase empathy.⁵ By reading about the lives of others and seeing the world through their eyes you can learn to appreciate emotions and understand experiences you've never had. Try reading fiction (historical, cross-cultural, etc.), or explore bio- and auto-biographies.
3. **Focus on connection.** When someone is sharing a difficult or emotionally intense experience, it can be overwhelming to think of an appropriate empathetic response while also remaining present in the moment. Don't worry too much about what to say or how to say it. Prioritize listening and understanding and show the other person that you recognize the gravity of their emotion. At the end of the day, what's most important is that you acknowledge their situation and let them know you care.

Resources



[Brené Brown – The Power of Vulnerability](#)



[6 Expressions to Use that Show Empathy at Work. Judith Humphrey \(2020\).](#) Fast Company



Develop your ability to empathize with others by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ *Leading Effectively Staff Members* (2020). The Importance of Empathy in the Workplace. Centre for Creative Leadership. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/empathy-in-the-workplace-a-tool-for-effective-leadership/>

² Glazer, R. (2019). Command and Control Leadership is Dead – Here's What's Taking Its Place. Inc.com. <https://www.inc.com/robert-glazer/command-control-leadership-is-dead-heres-whats-taking-its-place.html>

³ Scott, B. A., Colquitt, J. A., Paddock, E. L., & Judge, T. A. (2010). A daily investigation of the role of manager empathy on employee well-being. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 113(2), 127-140.

⁴ Bernard, M. (2021). Empathetic leadership and internal communications can help mitigate burnout—here's how. <https://axonify.com/blog/empathy-and-communication-helps-mitigate-burnout/>

⁵Kidd, D. C., & Castano, E. (2013). Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science*, 342(6156), 377-380.