

Tough empathy and perspective as the recipe for leadership success

Google studied 180 teams over two years to understand how to create high performance. It found the most critical characteristic for enhancing team performance is psychological safety. Leaders with more emotional intelligence (EQ) are equipped with the skills to create psychological safety, therefore propelling organisational performance.

One of the foundations of EQ is empathy. Unempathetic leaders struggle to handle tough conversations and conflicts. The form of empathy not talked about as much as others is tough empathy, and it's a critical element of effective leadership. Whether you want to build a cohesive team, overcome roadblocks or help your team adapt to change, tough empathy is vital.

Empathy is often seen as soft and fluffy. Genuine empathy is anything but that. Yes, leaders exhibiting these traits understand their people's emotions, but they are not influenced by them. Academic and author, Brene Brown, says "empathy is feeling with people". However, this alone won't lead to change. It needs to be applied with purpose, and that's what tough empathy is all about.

Despite its title, tough empathy doesn't mean telling people what to do or giving them tough choices. In their classic article, 'Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?' experts, Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones, said: "Tough empathy means giving people what they need, not what they want".

Their point is leaders need to understand what's driving the individual while keeping an eye firmly on what must be achieved. It's about influencing their thinking process towards a conclusion that benefits them. This is more than emotional empathy, it's understanding how a person is feeling. To discover why people feel the way they do, leaders need to change their perspective.

ADOPT THEIR VIEWPOINTS

Natalie Longmire and David Harrison undertook a study on the topic of perspectives and empathy at work. They define perspective taking as 'cognitive empathy'. As Harrison puts it: "It's about understanding someone else's thoughts and viewpoints. That's distinct from empathic concern, which is understanding what somebody else feels."

This is learning to step into someone's shoes but without feeling their emotions. It's a logical process, so for those leaders whose style is logical, it's a skill that can be tapped into quickly.



Research shows employees whose perspective is heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work. It promotes cooperation and collaboration. Listening to people can shift their mindset from resistance to acceptance.

Right now, we have workplaces filled with people who are worried about the future. They might be struggling to keep up with change and might even be isolated, working remotely. It's a fragile world out there. Shifting the team from fear of change to being willing to try starts with perspective and accelerates with tough empathy. This is where it all comes together.

Leaders can't influence people if they can't see where they're coming from. To understand how the other person sees things, ask. This is an intentional process where there's no room for judgment. Leaders don't always have to get it right. The process of being listened to is enough to establish connection and trust.

PERSPECTIVE PLUS TOUGH EMPATHY MOVES MOUNTAINS

The paradox of tough empathy resolves when we understand a leader is tough on the problem but shows compassion and a sense of responsibility for the person. Tough empathy isn't directive. It's influential.

Take this for example: "I understand you're worried your team won't be able to meet the targets, but we need to achieve them so our client can deliver on his promises to his customers. How do we make that happen? What are we going to do differently to ensure we deliver? How can I best support you?"

A leader uses tough empathy by committing to their teams. It's about operating under the proviso of supporting you, but also challenging you to level up and become the best version of yourself.

This is a process you facilitate rather than lead. By empowering people to make their own choices, leaders create team ownership, commitment and accountability to the outcomes.

Practise tough empathy. It will move mountains and expose a brand-new landscape.

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