

Investing in Your Team with Empathy Today



Unsplash

Empathy is a hot topic in leadership today – and for good reason. Empathy allows leaders to connect with their team on a deeper level and can give managers or business owners a glimpse into how other folks in their organization feel about themselves and their roles.

As we look to exit the pandemic, organizational leaders must be more intentional than ever about the way they use empathy. Almost everyone was placed under greater strain due to Covid, and now is the time for leaders to show that they care about their followers on a deeper, human level.

But, just empathizing with your employees is rarely enough. You need to turn that empathy into action – here's how.

What is Empathy?

Many leaders mistakenly believe that empathy is a term that loosely describes “feeling another person’s emotions”. However, this version of empathy – sometimes called “affective empathy” – is too flexible to be leveraged effectively in the workplace.

Instead, try to see empathy as Berkley’s Greater Good program describes it, “Cognitive empathy, sometimes called ‘perspective taking,’ refers to our ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions.” Cognitive empathy requires leaders to consciously consider another person’s perspective and is more effective than emotional empathy, as you have to spend time and effort to consider another person’s perspective.

Cognitive empathy can also be used to make meaningful changes to business operations and policies. When you take the time to think from another persons’ perspective, you’ll be able to see the things that are holding them back or causing them stress. This can be the first step towards making key investments in your team, like upskilling and wellbeing programs.

Upskilling

Upskilling is when an organization sets aside time and financial resources to improve an employee’s skills. Upskilling improves the quality and efficiency of your employees, but it also increases their loyalty and motivation, as your organization’s support can go a long way in helping them achieve their career goals and dreams.

You can start investing in upskilling by speaking with your employees and asking them about their career goals. Based on what they tell you, use cognitive empathy to consider how your organization can help them reach those goals. For example, you

might offer flexible working hours to employees who want to earn a degree, or you might pay for pertinent training programs.

Well-being Programs

Your teams' well-being probably took a knock during the pandemic. The world was flipped upside down for nearly two years, and unthinkable changes occurred across almost all industries. So, as a leader, it's your job to take responsibility and use empathy to create wellbeing programs that cater to your team.

A good well-being program should start with communication. You need to tell your team why you're opening a well-being program, and you need to hear from your followers to learn about their needs and stressors. While you listen to your employees, look out for signs of trauma that may be impacting their ability to share their needs openly. This might manifest itself in outbursts from your team members or difficulty keeping a routine. If you notice these signs, consider investing more heavily in mental health support services like access to therapists.

Once you've listened to your team and taken note of their needs, you should start moving quickly to put a well-being program in place that suits your budget and your organization. If you're low on financial resources, remember that a well-being program can be as simple as offering flexible working hours so folks can make it to exercise classes. If you have more cash to spend, then consider allocating a wellness budget to each individual, and allow them to spend it on their own health-related goals.

Working with Difference

Empathy usually has two triggers: recognition of another's

pain, or recognition of another's differences from ourselves. Hopefully, your well-being program can be put into effect to help others who are dealing with pain in any form. But, how can you use empathy to handle differences in the workplace?

First and foremost, it's worth noting that not all differences can be overcome via empathy. If someone in your organization breaks clearly from your company's purpose, then it may be in everyone's best interest to let that person move on to a new organization with different values.

But, most differences can be negotiated effectively through empathetic thinking. This is particularly important if you lead a diverse team of people that has different values and opinions from you. Start with cognitive empathy, and simply listen to the viewpoints that might be jarring or different from your own. Take a while to think about them, and explain to your team that you need time to consider everyone's opinion fairly – no one will judge negatively for being considerate.

Follow through on your empathetic practices by creating diversity policies that give you a road map for decision-making and help you operate in a fair, transparent way. These diversity policies shouldn't aim to cover every possibility but should be clear, agreed upon, and have all employee's best interests at heart.

Conclusion

As a leader, empathy is the first step towards creating a kinder, more caring workplace. By listening to your followers and considering their position thoroughly, you can start to make organizational changes like implementing wellbeing programs or investing in upskilling. These changes will help employees feel respected and will improve your effectiveness as a leader.



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