

# 'E' is for Empathy

LEADERS ARE SUPPOSED TO HAVE IT  
— BUT HOW IMPORTANT IS IT?

By Sarah Dobson

**L**ook around and some of the more successful leaders in the spotlight today may not immediately be described as empathetic. Consider, for example, Martin Shkreli, CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals — who raised the price of a lifesaving medicine by 5,000 per cent — or Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos — whose company was said to use cruel management practices.

And yet in studies and articles looking at business success, “empathy” is often mentioned as a must-have leadership trait. So what exactly is it — and why is it so essential?

At its core, empathy is about perspective-taking, says Craig Dowden, an executive coach based in Toronto.

“You’re able to understand the thoughts, feelings and needs of the people around you, so you have a broader external awareness and understand that and appreciate your environment.”

And it’s important, he says. In looking at leadership effectiveness, empathy is among the predictors of leadership effectiveness, according to a 2012 study by the Management Research Group looking at 2,121 leaders.

In looking at the competencies that predict ethical leadership, empathy comes across as the number one driver, says Dowden.

“When we’re aware of our external environment, when we have external awareness and we understand the needs of the stakeholders, the customers, the communities we serve, our employees, we’re much better-equipped to make a more informed, complex decision rather than just being from a self-generated, self-oriented perspective. So I think empathy adds that layer of complexity to the decision-making process.



Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos

PHOTO: REUTERS/JASON REDMOND

And you’re more aware, so even when you have to make difficult decisions, you understand what the implications of those are and you manage them accordingly.”

Empathy really is the ability to park your own biases, your own role and your own set of experiences to truly put yourself in someone else’s shoes so you can understand the world from their perspective, says Debby Carreau, founder of Inspired HR in Calgary.

And leaders, as they grow, get further and further away from other people’s roles, and the roles they once had, she says, “not only because of the time factor but also because the world has changed dramatically and so often what we’ll do is we’ll paint everyone with the same brush when the reality is no one’s experience is exactly the same.”

Empathy is a sense of awareness, says David Town, president of Your Leadership Matters in Aurora, Ont.

“It’s an awareness and an appreciation for others’ feelings and perspectives.”

And it’s critically important for building relationships, he says.

“The skill of demonstrating empathy contributes very profoundly to coaching because without a strong relationship, it’s hard to have a conversation where you’re influencing someone without just telling them what to do or ordering them... So from a relationship perspective... there’s really two main ways to influence people — hard tactics and soft tactics,” says Town.

“And I think we’re finding that soft tactics are more appealing for gen y and gen x and it requires the skill of appreciating someone’s feelings.”

**“Given the recent economic crises and the profound mistrust people have in organizations, it makes an amazingly compelling case for why empathy is going to be an essential trait for leadership teams.”**

There’s also been a shift from IQ to EQ in the boardroom that has carried with it more empathy skills, without necessarily targeting empathy, he says.

“If you have a fairly high EQ, that would almost presume by definition that you must have some empathy skills because it’s part of emotional intelligence. And I think there’s also the sustainability so I think, in some circumstances, leaders can have short-term success with a lack of empathy skills but over the longer haul... in a turnaround or in certain circumstances where a lack of empathy can work quite effectively, there’ll likely still be a change going forward at some point because I just think it’s not sustainable for a long period of time without some degree of empathy and emotional intelligence.”

The expectations of leaders have changed, says Carreau.

“People expect a much more well-rounded, holistic leader. We all know, decades ago, the command-and-control leadership style was prevalent and expected. Today, workers are absolutely demanding a different kind of leader and different working conditions for sure.”

**LINKING EMPATHY TO PERFORMANCE**

Strong empathy skills and strong relationships build much higher levels of engagement, and the statistics on disengagement, in North America and around the world, are alarming, says Town.

“Empathy demonstrates that you care. And I think that builds engagement, so you get discretionary efforts, you get better productivity, people come to work more motivated, they want to work for you, back to the gen y and gen x — I think they are more dedicated to their boss than they are the organization.”

One of the strongest drivers of engagement is around trust in senior leadership, says Dowden, meaning employees believe their leaders have their best interest at heart and are actively looking out for their well-being.

“It’s easy to make the argument that empathy would be a key cornerstone of that because being aware of what the needs of

your employee base is, what the needs of your organization is, then you can really organize your management, leadership and organizational practice to address that,” he says.

“Given the recent economic crises that have happened and the profound mistrust that people have in organizations, and that people are starting to demand more from an organization and start to understand how they’re ethically oriented, it makes an amazingly compelling case for why empathy is going to be an essential trait for leadership teams within organizations in order to be successful.”

Without a doubt, the better a leader can understand his team and workforce, the better the productivity’s going to be, says Carreau.

“If you’re disconnected from your workforce, you’re not going to be able to leverage the full value of your human capital.”

Empathy can also help on the global stage, as broader awareness can help set people up for success, says Dowden.

“With empathy comes a natural curiosity for someone else’s reality, to make us more open to other people’s circumstances and experiences. So it maximizes the chances that we’re going to pick up on critical information that we may miss if we’re looking to advance our own agenda, so then that broadens our perspective.”

**LEARNING TO BE EMPATHETIC**

So, can empathy be learned or is it something a person has to be born with? It’s a good question, says Carreau.

“Often, if (they) can reframe how others see them and they understand it, it helps people change. But the reality is not everyone wants to change so it’s a little bit of that can-do versus will-do as well. So it takes a little bit longer, and it’s definitely a different leadership skill than someone who’s particularly busy and isn’t spending a lot of time with their team. To truly understand where someone’s coming from, you’ve got to be a great listener, you’ve got to be able to repeat what they’re saying to you, make sure that you’ve heard them well, all those kinds of pieces, but you need leaders that are willing to invest that time

as well,” she says.

“It comes down to self-awareness, and truly if leaders are aware that they relate well to others or if they’ve alienated themselves... so it’s not necessarily a hard skill you can measure for but it’s definitely something that your track record’s going to prove.”

And when it comes to training or development on the empathy side, it’s really more around peer mentoring, peer circles, sharing best practices and talking about what works and sharing experiences, says Carreau.

“It’s a very tough one to train from a hard skill development side, other than really teaching people, when they are talking to someone, to park their own bias, park their own personal experience, and try to truly understand where the other person is coming from. So some communication training is very helpful but it’s not the be-all and end-all — you still have to put it into practice.”

And when it comes to self-awareness, leaders have to be asking themselves the right questions and be willing to hear feedback, says Town.

“(It’s about) ‘This is who you are showing up as as opposed to this is who you want to be.’ If there’s any chance for movement and change and improvement on this, the person has to

embrace this: ‘There’s a gap between where I should be and where I am.’”

But if it’s not role-modelled from top leadership, it won’t have much stick, says Town.

“If companies want to take a coaching approach and encourage empathy skills, that needs to start at the top, otherwise employees don’t buy in, they know this is the flavour of the month.”

Many leaders may feel they need to be tough so exhibiting empathy can be seen as a weakness, says Dowden. And if they don’t see someone emulating these behaviours, especially at the top, then they’re not going to do that themselves.

“They can think that being less empathetic and much more self-oriented is the key to success, so this is where integrating empathy as part of your culture is really crucial,” he says.

Research out of Harvard Medical School, targeted at physicians, showed it is possible to raise someone’s level of empathy skills, says Dowden.

“It’s something that’s naturally gifted and, at the same time, it’s something we can build. I think that’s what’s also very exciting about that space is that this is something through practice and awareness and understanding, we can actually foster within ourselves.”

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