

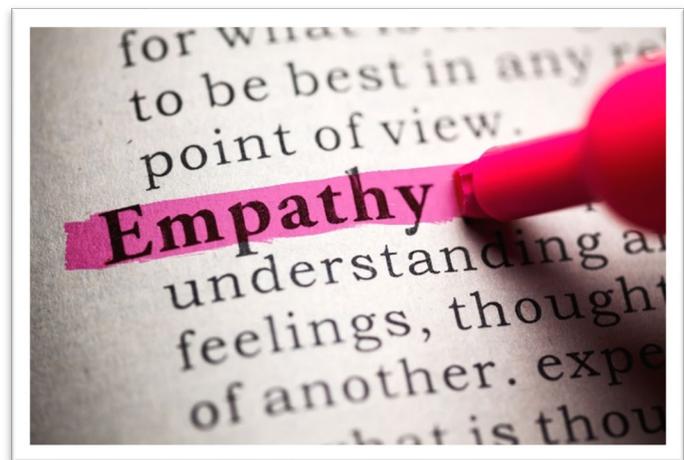
Career Compass No. 86: Empathy Is a Superpower

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...someone who understands me!

By Dr. Frank Benest | Oct 26, 2020 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank –

I am a mid-manager overseeing the budget division in the finance department of a mid-sized county in the west. Most of my team of budget analysts is still working from home. Of course, county tax revenues have plummeted due to the pandemic and other disasters, such as wildfires. We are trying to help our organization adapt by working with departments to not only cuts costs but to find other service delivery models, such as partnering with other government and nonprofit agencies to deliver services.



I am energized by the challenge to resize our organization and experiment with new service models. I'm analytic and driven to learn and achieve.

Here is my concern. My budget team members are stressed out. We've already cut several vacant positions in budget and other areas of finance and there is much uncertainty. I'm trying to be sympathetic to everyone's distress and feelings. I ask at the beginning our virtual meetings "How are you feeling?" However, I don't get much feedback. Usually people respond "I'm fine" or "I'm good."

In the midst of our county budget crisis, we've got a lot of work to push out. When staff do express a concern or issue, it seems overblown.

My team members are hunkered down and stuck. I want to be a good leader for them. Do you have any suggestions?

I commend you for trying to be sensitive to your team members. People are feeling unhinged, fearful about their health, livelihood, family, community, and country. The future is uncertain and scary. However, your sympathy is insufficient. You must demonstrate **empathy** if you are to lead your team amid all the disruption.

People like you (and me) who are analytic, driven to learn and achieve, and love challenges have difficulty being empathetic. In a recent survey of CEOs, over 80% recognized empathy as key to success (Jamil Zaki, "[Making Empathy Central to Your Company Culture](#)," *hbr.org*, May 30, 2019). However, most of us have "empathy deficits." Only 18% of leaders who have completed the CliftonStrengths assessment identified empathy as one of their top five strengths (Dan Rockwell, "[What if I Suck at Empathy—7 Ways to Create an Empathy Advantage](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, July 2, 2020).

The traditional leadership narrative is about you the leader. It is about your vision, your ideas, your goals. However, true leadership is about your followers—what they find meaningful, what they need and want, what they hope to achieve. Leaders can't force people to follow—they invite them on a journey. A workshop participant once stated that a leader without followers is simply "a bloke out for a walk." (Jim Bozin and Carrie Tomlin, "[How Leaders Can Regain Trust in Untrusting Times](#)," *knowledge@wharton* blog, August 18, 2020.)

Therefore, your job as a leader is to foster the conditions so that people achieve their potential and make big contributions to the organization and the communities that they serve. (Frances Frei and Anne Morriss, "[Managing People—Begin with Trust](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 2020.)

The "toxic tandem"

Robert Sutton in his *Harvard Business Review* article "[How to Be a Good Boss in a Bad Economy](#)" (Summer 2020) describes a "toxic tandem" for leaders. When managers get authority over others, they become more self-centered and less mindful of the needs, desires, and aspirations of subordinates. This is compounded by the fact that employees scrutinize their boss's every word and behavior. This "toxic tandem" is amplified during adversity or crisis.

The only way to counter this toxic tandem and create followers is to cultivate empathy.

What is empathy?

Empathy is not sympathy that leads you to feel sorry for the difficulties or misfortunes of others. Empathy is not about feeling tolerant or giving people the benefit of the doubt.

Empathy is characterized by the ability to:

- See the world through the eyes of the other person.
- Understand, acknowledge, and consider their unique hopes, fears, ideas, and perspectives.

(Katherine Bell, “[Empathy: Not Such a Soft Skill](#),” *hbr.org*, May 28, 2009.)

Our local governments are human organizations. Empathy requires that we leaders see employees as human beings and acknowledge them as whole people—people with families, friends, and pets; rents or mortgages to pay; health concerns; and hopes, dreams, and fears about the future. (Allison Lazenby, “[Crisis Reveals Managers’ Superpowers](#),” *root* blog, June 29, 2020.)

Why is empathy important?

Empathy has always been a key yet undervalued leadership strength. Now it has become central to our leadership capacity. Why?

First of all, empathy creates connection and relationship. Your formal authority as a mid-manager or even top executive can only force a minimal level of performance and compliance. People are more likely to choose to follow if they feel connected to you as a leader and person.

Second, in this time of crisis, we need employees and organizations to adapt (see [Career Compass No. 81: We Need Adaptive Leaders Now](#)). Empathy enhances influence in times of turbulence and change. A leader cannot exert influence without acknowledging the hopes, dreams, values, and concerns of people and tying positive change to those human values and concerns. Once a leader acknowledges people’s feelings and then responds to their concerns, followers tend to be more open to listening, learning, and changing. Empathy is pre-condition for positive adaptation.

Third, to make decisions and act, leaders need data from employees and other stakeholders. This data is not just facts and figures but their beliefs and values based on their life experiences, as well as current feelings and emotions.

Fourth, empathy allows leaders to more fully identify and comprehend opportunities and challenges amid uncertainty. You won’t be able to elicit information, ideas, and issues from the people in the trenches unless they feel that you care about them and are connected to them (Peter Bregman, “[Productive Conversations Take Real Empathy](#),” *hbr.org*, March 4, 2020.)

Finally, we operate in a pluralistic world. We can’t be effective if we don’t understand the life experiences, values, and beliefs of employees and the community people we aim to serve. (Dan Rockwell, “[An Essential—but Neglected—Skill that Fuels Success](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, August 3, 2020.)

T---F---A---R

Leaders tend to over-emphasize their analytic neural network, which generates rational thought. This analytic neural network in our brains is used to solve problems and make decisions. Equally important is the emotional neural network, which involves our feelings. The emotional neural network in our brains facilitates reflection, relationship, connection, and empathy. As leaders, we must toggle between the two networks if we are to be effective, especially in these uncertain and “messy” times. (Melvin Smith et al., [“The Best Managers Balance Analytical and Emotional Intelligence,”](#) *hbr.org*, June 12, 2020.)

To facilitate adaption, leaders must understand what Alexander Caillet, an organizational psychologist, has called the “Thinking Path.” It looks like this:

T-F-A-R

Let’s start from right to left. “R” stands for “Results.” That is what we all seek. Results come from “A” or “Actions.” Therefore, to achieve a balanced budget (Result), we need to cut costs and seek new ways of delivering service (Actions). However, Actions don’t flow directly from “T” or “Thoughts.” In your case of the budget, the “Thought” is “we need to creatively balance the budget in the face of plummeting revenues.” Between the “Thought” and the “Action” is the “F” or “Feeling.” People’s emotion has a big impact on the hoped for “Action.”

Again, we typically over-emphasize the “T” and under-emphasize and undervalue the “F.” If people feel disheartened, demoralized, or fearful in any way, they are unlikely to embrace appropriate change. If people feel purposeful, hopeful, supported, even inspired, they are more likely to act in alignment with the “Thought.”

Consequently, empathy (and responding to what we discover by empathizing) is critical to bridging “Thought” and “Action” and thereby achieving desired “Results.” The brilliance of your ideas, thinking, and plans is impotent without attending to the way people feel. The question for all leaders is thus, “How do I want my team to feel?” (See [“The Question You Need to Ask to Focus Your Team,”](#) *eblingroup.com* blog, July 21, 2020.)

How do you cultivate empathy?

For many of us, empathy is not an innate trait. Rather, it is a learned skill. You can develop empathy like other skills through conscious and reflective practice. (See Peter Bregman, [“Productive Conversations Take Real Empathy,”](#) *hbr.org*, March 4, 2020.)

Before I suggest some approaches for cultivating empathy, I want to share a bias. I believe that you can’t be empathetic without truly caring for the people you lead. If you don’t care for others, your attempts at being present, attentive, and open will ultimately fail and will be experienced by others as “false.”

Practicing empathy is often difficult because we humans are wired to promote and defend our ideas and what we already believe and disregard any contrary data or perspectives. We have a confirmation bias. In addition, many of us in leadership roles are very action-oriented and want to immediately get to “what” we need to do and “how” we are going to do it.

Given these barriers, I’d like to suggest nine practices to cultivate empathy:

1. Start with self-empathy

Before interacting with others, check-in with yourself. Ask yourself: How am I *really* feeling? What is energizing me? What is frustrating me? What are my hopes, concerns, and fears? Am I eating, drinking, sleeping, or crying too much? Do I feel alone or isolated? Then develop a plan to minimize any emotions or behaviors that are undercutting your health, energy, connectedness with family and others, or your capacity to lead. For instance, develop a walking or exercise routine or schedule times to connect with others. Ask for help when you need it. (See Whitney Johnson and Amy Humble, “[To Take Care of Others, Start by Taking Care of Yourself](#),” *hbr.org*, April 28, 2020.)

Name your own emotions, acknowledge them, give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel, and then take a deep breath and do something positive to support yourself. Only then can you move more fully forward in your leadership role.

Under stress, undefined emotions can immobilize us, distract us, and get in the way of being present and leading others.

2. Show up to be consciously present

We managers are always busy and want to make decisions and take action. To practice empathy, leaders need to slow down and be attentive. You want to be attuned to your team members and sense how they are present, what they are feeling, if they are distracted. You need to notice tone, expressions, gestures, and general energy.

3. Ask questions to connect and to solicit data of all kinds

Instead of asking “How are you doing,” ask some other questions, such as:

- What are you working on?
- For you, what does “success” look like?
- Why is this project important or meaningful to you?
- What’s working for you?
- What are you proud of?
- What are the challenges you are facing?
- What is undercutting your energy?
- What is one step forward?
- What would you like to try?
- What is new in your life?
- How is your family handling current difficulties?

- This weekend, what are you looking forward to?
- How can I or other team members support you?

(See Dan Rockwell, "[How to Stop Asking, 'How Are You?' and Create Real Conversation](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, August 20, 2020.)

Ask these questions with a curious mind. Before responding to what a team member is saying, say "tell me more." You are mining for data, all kinds of data.

Since one of your goals is soliciting feelings and emotions, not just facts and figures, start your in-person or virtual meeting with a segment called "take 5." During the first five minutes of the meeting, team members are asked to share something from their personal lives or what they are learning or something they are proud of.

4. Stop talking and actively listen

We leaders typically love the sound of our voice. I do. However, to promote empathy, you must stop talking, listen, and acknowledge what you hear.

As Dan Rockwell suggests, "Connection begins as people feel understood...Issues are resolved *after* people feel understood." To understand, you must suspend judgment. "Empathy describes feelings. It doesn't judge them." (Dan Rockwell, "[The Path from Empathy to Accountability](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, Nov 15, 2019.)

5. Strive for "intellectual humility"

Listen to understand. Let others finish talking and limit your internal monologue. (Michael Reddington, "[5 Ways You Can Lead by Listening](#)," *Real Leaders* blog, July 1, 2020.) Don't interrupt people with a "yes, but." Be open to the ideas and perspectives of others and acknowledge them (even if you do not agree).

Exhibit a learning, not educating orientation. As Warren Berger asks in [The Book of Beautiful Questions](#), do you act like a "soldier" defending territory or a "scout" exploring new land? (See Daniel Pink, [Pinkcast 3.09](#), August 13, 2019.)

6. Create a safe environment for sharing

Of course, the best way for a leader to create an environment in which people feel safe to express themselves is to model that behavior. Share what you are feeling, what concerns you, what challenges you are facing, what are some mistakes that you have made, what is going on in the daily struggles and joys of family life. (For tips on creating psychological safety, see [Career Compass No. 69: Psychological Safety—The Key Determinant of Team Effectiveness](#).)

7. Do something, but not immediately

As a leader, you want to demonstrate to people that you heard them and that the conversation mattered. Therefore, you want to share with them how the conversation changed your thinking or the course of action that you were contemplating. For instance, your team members may share that they feel hesitant or inadequate in

suggesting that their client departments explore different service delivery models. Based on the conversation, you can secure a training session on alternative service delivery approaches for the budget analysts on your team and the managers in their assigned departments.

If the conversation does not prompt any response from you, the conversation is not “authentic;” it is merely talk. To influence others, you must let them influence you.

Letting people know how you took into account their feelings and perspectives builds connection and trust. Even if you decide not to change course, you can explain your thought and decision-making process after you had the original discussion with the team. (Joe Lipham, “[What We Need Most Today](#),” *trainingmag.com*, July 14, 2020.)

In showing how you have incorporated the thinking of others or addressed some of their concerns or fears, you don’t want to respond to the person or the team immediately or wait too long. According to Blount and Carroll, the ideal response time is two to seven days after the initial discussion. If you respond too quickly, either in the initial conversation or a day later, the employee or team may not feel that you have fully considered their concerns or suggestions. If you wait longer than seven days, they may feel their input was dismissed or not fully considered. (See Sally Blount and Shana Carroll, “[Overcome Resistance to Change with Two Conversations](#),” *hbr.org* blog, May 16, 2017).

8. Focus on purpose

Because a lot of people are disheartened, focus on purpose and meaning. As Dan Pink asserts in his book *Drive* (2009), purpose is a critical self-motivator. The other two self-motivators are autonomy (the freedom to figure it out within certain guide rails) and mastery (the opportunity to learn and get better and better in what we do.)

So, instead of immediately jumping into “what” we need to do and “how” we are going to do it, start with the “why.” Of course, different people may perceive different meaning in the work. Therefore, ask team members “Why is this important to you?” You can also help people connect the dots between their work and the big organizational goals. For example, you can explore with your team members how their work on the budget will help the county maintain public safety, health, and safety net services for struggling county residents. (See [Career Compass No. 85: To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance Employee Experience](#).)

9. Help people see progress

Even with meaningful work, it is easy for people to get demotivated in turbulent times. Consequently, in conversations with team members, it is wise to break big goals into smaller ones and focus on progress. For example, your big goal is to secure board of supervisor approval of a balanced budget that does minimal damage to the organization and the services that the county provides. Drafting a preliminary budget proposing a few alternative service delivery experiments would demonstrate progress and keep the team motivated.

If people see progress in meeting certain milestones, they tend to stay motivated. (See David Burkus, “[Why Motivation Doesn’t Last](#),” *davidburkus.com* blog, August 18, 2020.)

Empathy is a superpower

Without empathy, there is little relationship and connection with followers who may choose not to follow. Especially in these uncertain and turbulent times, leaders won’t be able to help team members adapt without understanding and acknowledging their emotions and feelings.

As leaders advance in their careers, it is the soft skills that produce the hard results. Empathy is a foundational soft skill. For leaders, empathy is a superpower.



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