



Empathy in Action: A Thoughtful Look at the Empathetic Leader

By Scott Blanchard

Ron Darling, a stellar pitcher with the New York Mets in the 1980s, was going through a brutal divorce. He struggled through spring training and the start of the season. His emotional turmoil hurt his game.

Davey Johnson, the team's roughneck manager, noticed Darling's struggles and reportedly said to him, "I went through a rough divorce. You can't sleep. It affects every part of your life. It's devastating. I get it. My heart goes out to you."

He then continued, "But I'm also your manager. We pay you a lot of money to pitch. It's also in your best interests to be successful. So leave the past behind you and throw the ball!" As the story goes, this conversation turned Darling's career around.

This story is a wonderful illustration of the power of empathy. If Johnson hadn't first empathized with his player's difficulties, Darling might have become furious, left the team, or quit baseball. But Johnson first empathized, making Darling receptive to the truth, which inspired him to perform to the best of his ability.

The story also shows that empathetic leadership must not be used in isolation. It is a virtue that thrives when it's coupled with other virtues. Being only empathetic would lead to its own set of problems. Balancing empathy with other qualities is where things can get a bit spicy.

Empathy is Essential for Great Leadership

Let's start with some basics before we explore the complexity of this topic. A good leader is an empathetic leader. In fact, it's hard to image a successful leader who isn't empathetic.

The pandemic has taken an emotional toll on everyone. We have a greater need today to be heard and understood. We expect our leaders to acknowledge what we are feeling and be sensitive to it. That is why the quality of empathy is so prized right now.

Being empathetic isn't just a feel-good philosophy. It stimulates innovation, spurs engagement, and improves retention. People who work for empathetic leaders are more productive, loyal, and happier at their jobs.

Being empathetic is a win-win proposition.

Empathy in Relationships

Empathy is fundamental part of our relationships. It is vital under certain circumstances. It's when, as a leader, you know it's time to ask, "How can I support you?"

Listening is a wonderful form of empathy. Sometimes people need to be heard and that's sufficient. Sometimes people want advice. Whatever the case, though, empathy should result in meaningful action.

Empathy in Conversations

I like to say there are two kinds of conversations: useful and useless. Empathy is essential for a useful conversation. I must know how you are feeling if we are to have a meaningful exchange. By demonstrating empathy, I can connect with you, understand where you are, and move forward.

Useful conversations create positive regard between two people. They also create clarity and focus about what will happen next. In contrast, useless conversations lack clarity or end with a disagreement or a drop in regard from one or both people.

Sometimes people are unempathetic because they don't know their own feelings or they project what they are feeling onto others. If I'm feeling suspicious, I assume the person I'm talking to is also feeling this way. Empathy really starts with self-awareness.

Empathy and Forthrightness

Empathy should be present in our interactions but needs to be coupled with forthrightness. It is a business truth that people need to perform, and, if they don't meet expectations, the barriers to performance must be addressed.

To be clear, our reaction to someone in distress should be warm and empathetic. But that doesn't mean the person should be coddled. In fact, they may not want to be coddled.

Empathy and Misreading Situations

It's easy to misinterpret people and situations. We often bring our last conversation or the events of the day into the next interaction. We don't always know if someone is reacting to us or to something that happened earlier. Observing someone's behavior

over a period of time is an effective way to separate what we might be projecting onto a situation.

Great leaders know how to balance their emotional and cognitive sides. They don't get caught in someone else's emotional turmoil. They listen with love. And they listen with discrimination. That combination produces true empathy.

Nice Versus Kind

When we're empathizing with someone who's struggling, there's a tendency to be nice instead of kind. Nice is when we sugarcoat the truth or avoid it entirely. Kind is when we tell the truth in an empathetic or supportive way.

It's unfair to withhold information from someone whose performance is subpar. You may feel it is the nice thing to do when someone is in distress, but it isn't ultimately kind. The facts will remain unchanged no matter how you try to gloss over an issue. When you are kind, though, you are giving someone an opportunity to grow and change.

Empathy and kindness coupled with discrimination is always advisable.

Empathy and SLII®

The fundamental teaching of SLII® is how to break things down into discrete situations. Once you do this, you can deal with each situation based on its own merits. The first job of a leader taking a situational approach is to stop and consider the other person. This is an act of empathy.

One-on-one meetings, another cornerstone of SLII®, give leaders a chance to be empathetic. The employee sets the agenda and shares what's important to them. Your job as a leader is to learn how they are performing and feeling—and empathize with their challenges.

A Final Thought

We all need to understand what positive and negative behaviors we regularly demonstrate. It's so easy to become overwhelmed by our work that we lose sight of how we affect others.

When I catch myself falling into this trap, I'll say to the other person, "Let me see if I can repeat back to you what I've heard so you know I understand what you've said."

It's my attempt to be empathetic. How about yours?

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