

# How Leaders Can Find The Sweet Spot When Balancing Accountability And Empathy



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Today’s leaders face a tough mandate. They’re expected to hold team members accountable for their actions—both in terms of fulfilling job duties and adhering to stated policies and standards—while at the same time practicing empathy. Leaders must help employees feel psychologically safe in their work environments and be understanding about the life challenges that everyone faces. This is a seriously tough balance to strike right now.

As the nation and world begin to find a new normal while dealing with the pandemic, stressors on leaders and employees are intense. Empathy is absolutely needed—particularly in a tight job market where workers can and will walk out the door at a moment’s notice. But organizations are also trying to get back to a “new normal,” driving a heightened urgency for efficiency and productivity. It’s not an easy situation for anyone. The first step to overcoming it is consciously recognizing that you, as a leader, need to think hard about how to balance accountability and empathy and, from there, find your own distinctive “sweet spot.”

## Accountability Vs. Responsibility

Most leaders could define the words “accountability” and “empathy.” However, to conquer the challenge at hand, you need to develop a clear cognitive framework for each term beyond a simple definition.

Let's start with accountability. Merriam-Webster [defines](#) the word as “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions.” And therein lies an important distinction that's a good place for leaders to start building a deeper understanding of accountability: Accountability and responsibility aren't synonymous, at least not when applied to the workplace.

Job responsibilities are the stated duties of a given position. They're what you're supposed to do. Accountability is whether you fulfill those responsibilities and—this is the important part—how willing and able you are to own up to what went right and what went wrong in the course of doing so.

## On Being Empathetic

Now, let's move on to empathy. I think most people would agree that empathizing means understanding someone's situation and being sensitive to it. In some cases, it means you've been in virtually the same set of circumstances and know exactly what it's like. Of course, knowing what empathy is and *being* empathetic are two different things. Leaders need to develop certain traits to demonstrate empathy while they're holding team members accountable for their job-related actions.

In 2007, the medical journal *Advances in Nursing Science* published an [article](#) entitled “Toward a holistic conceptualization of empathy for nursing practice” by Theresa Wiseman. It contains four traits of empathy that have since been widely discussed and accepted far beyond the healthcare sector. They [are](#):

**1. Perspective taking.** This means stepping outside of your own mindset and consciously trying to see things from another person's point of view.

**2. Staying out of judgment.** We've all said it: “Don't judge!” However, being judgmental tends to be a reflex. During interactions, avoid inferring that someone else's response to a situation, whether emotional or actual, was invalid or wrong—at least until you've gathered all the facts.

**3. Recognizing the emotion.** Just putting a name to how another person is feeling can lead a conversation in the right direction. For example, if an employee comes into your office clearly upset over the actions of a colleague, your initial response could be, “It sounds like you're angry.”

**4. Communication.** This is probably the broadest and most challenging of the four traits. It refers to being able to effectively express everything that must come after understanding the other person's viewpoint, not judging them and recognizing the emotions in play. Leaders need strong communication skills to articulate and enforce accountability while showing empathy.

## Tips For Finding The Balance

The good news is that some of the tools for striking the right balance may already be in place at your organization. They include:

- Establishing clear expectations of team members from the job descriptions you use in hiring to the work assignments given,
- Setting boundaries with employees that let them know you're there for guidance and feedback, but they must be accountable for their own work,
- Providing regular, empathetic feedback through a comprehensive, consistent performance review process, as well as more frequently in team meetings and "check-in" conversations, and
- Creating a psychologically safe workplace, even if employees telecommute, in which failure is destigmatized and everyone can share freely knowing that their contributions will be valued.

Many leaders struggle with accountability because it feels punitive. No one wants to be the school principal taking students to task. But accountability is really more of a collaboration; you're helping employees take ownership of their work, learn from mistakes and build confidence from their successes. And empathy? Well, it sounds simple, but it's not always easy. Taking the time to learn how to show empathy and be an empathic leader is worthwhile and, I promise, it gets easier.