

# How To Expand Your Influence Through Empathetic Leadership



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At its most basic, empathy is the simple act of thinking about and understanding another person’s feelings. But applied purposefully and consistently, empathy can become a powerful—and appreciated—aspect of your leadership.

Empathetic leadership became an especially important theme during the height of the pandemic. Leaders had to shift their approach not only to adapt to the unexpected operational complexities of remote work and lockdowns but also to take more care of their teams’ general emotional well-being. Showing compassion, practicing patience when their people needed support and sharing their own vulnerability made the difference between leaders who shined during that time and those who fell short.

## The Benefits Of Empathetic Leadership

Continuing to employ a more empathetic style has served many leaders well, even as business has continued to evolve. And taking the concept beyond just being kind and thoughtful into a more formal application is a best practice that all leaders should embrace. Strategic use of empathetic leadership will enhance your communication, make your workplace more pleasant for everyone (who doesn’t want that?), improve teamwork and efficiency—and greatly increase your influence.

## How To Add Empathy To Your Leadership Practice

Henry David Thoreau once said, “The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when someone asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.”

Some people use empathy instinctively, regularly reaching out and connecting with others around them. But even if that isn't your natural disposition, empathy is a practice that can be learned and applied like any other, and you can begin with small, simple shifts in your current routines.

The easiest place to start is in your one-on-one meetings.

### **With Direct Reports**

I particularly like using empathetic leadership practices to take one-on-one meetings beyond routine project check-ins to reinforce connections and communication throughout the organization. Allocate time to discuss your team member's general well-being or just talk about how their lives are going. Ask open-ended questions and pay attention to what you learn.

### **With Your Peers**

If you don't already have one-on-ones with your peers, you might want to establish occasional check-ins. Identify the colleagues you would like to increase your connection with and make an effort to catch up with each periodically. Invite them for coffee, even if it's a virtual coffee over video. Try for one or two each month and keep these going throughout the year.

### **With Your Manager**

Follow a process similar to that with your team. Make time to talk beyond the regular agenda and get a handle on concerns, longer-term challenges and non-work interests.

### **Skipping Levels**

If you don't already do so, add check-ins with your boss's boss as well as the people reporting to your own direct reports. These touch points provide yet another chance to connect and learn.

## **Connection-Building Questions**

I often say that advisors and consultants know how to give the right answers, but coaches know how to ask the right questions. Be sure to use neutral, open-ended questions to allow the person to reveal their thoughts without feeling interrogated.

For example, checking in with questions such as “How have you been doing?” or “What’s keeping you up at night?” or “How was your weekend?” establishes rapport and opens the door for deeper discussions. Some answers may surprise you, which is a positive: You want to know what you don’t know. No matter what you hear, it offers a chance to connect and learn more—as well as offer support.

During the discussion, recap what you’ve heard and ask clarifying questions to make sure that the other person feels listened to and that you understand what is being communicated.

And continually follow up on past conversations—“How was the family reunion?” or “Whatever happened with your car repair?”—to engage with their interests and stay in the loop. Over time, you will form a more complete picture of the other person: what engages them, what they truly value and what makes them tick.

## **Curiosity And Genuine Connection**

The critical factors here are curiosity and authenticity. By approaching an interaction with an open, inquiring mind and listening actively, you will gain valuable insights about the other person and forge a deeper connection with them.

When your connections are genuine, you can use your influence not to manipulate but to create win-win situations. Understanding your team members’ goals and challenges will allow you to manage them more effectively and support them in their professional growth. When evaluating your own priorities, you’ll already know where they fit with your peers’ and leadership’s concerns. And when it’s time to enroll others in a new idea, you’ll already know what will resonate with them.

The bottom line? When you’re truly interested in and care about others, the connections you build will go a long way toward improving your team culture and will make you a more effective, trusted and influential leader. You are not just doing this for yourself—you’re doing it for everyone else, too.