

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Chapter 1

Defining Leadership through the Empathy Lens

Why not empathy? Well, it has been argued to be inefficient. Critics say that empathetic leaders get taken advantage of and that empathy can lead to burnout. It can be weaponized. And, of course, there's the bias; it's hard to be empathetic when you don't have some baseline understanding of what another person is experiencing.

And you know what? Those people are not wrong. But they're also missing the point. Because here's the thing: These critics are arguing against feeling everything, *not* against understanding people. And those are not the same thing. Defining leadership through the *empathy lens* is a way of seeing people more accurately. It's a useful tool because having accurate information about people leads to better decisions than assumptions do.

So, instead of arguing the case against it, again ask yourself: Why not *empathy*?

Telling the Story of Empathy

The year is 2026 and everything is about the *vibe*, the *aesthetic*. Instagram feeds are curated to within an inch of their lives, with many influencers using very specific filters, lighting and even high-end camera lenses to get just the right shade of moody. TikTokers sing along to trending sounds with such precision that even I — from a time when you dropped everything when your favorite song came on the radio to press “play” and “record” on your boom box so you could have an actual copy of it — am beyond impressed with their dedication. And empathy? Well, it feels like a lost art.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

But aesthetic is actually where empathy as we know it originated. In 1873, German philosopher Robert Vischer coined the term *Einfühlung* in his doctoral thesis *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics*. In this instance, he was referring to art; more specifically, our ability as humans to project our own feelings, movements, and personality on an inanimate object. He called this *aesthetic theory*, and he was deeply fascinated by our ability as humans to enter into a piece of art and feel the emotions the artist intended. Robert actually got this word from his father — novelist, poet, and playwright Friedrich Theodor Vischer — who used the term *Einfühlen* in explorations of idealism relative to architectural form. A quick look at the etymology of the word brings it all together: The German word *ein* translates to *in/into* while *föhlung* translates to *in feeling*.

In 1909, two British psychologists — Edward Titchener and James Ward — translated the original German word to the English *empathy*. But the meaning? Almost entirely opposite of what it is now. Early theorists used *empathy* to describe the act of a viewer projecting their own bodily feelings and movements into inanimate objects, paintings and nature; basically, exactly how Vischer intended it to be used.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the concept evolved. Psychologists studying social sciences began to focus less on projecting feelings into a painting and more on understanding other human beings. What started as an art-focused aesthetic transformed into an interpersonal skill aimed at grasping another person’s feelings; specifically, being able to understand others without damaging their feelings with your own biases.

In a way, empathy has turned back into an aesthetic. Consumers crave the psychological safety in knowing that the brands they invest hard-earned dollars in align with their values. And creators chase emotional connection with their audiences to keep those audiences engaged. That humanity shows itself in digital spaces daily, with the empathy aesthetic impacting things such as color schemes and design choices to make the user experience more inclusive. As a result, online

culture has started to reject the curation that once made Instagram the most downloaded app in the world. Now people want rawness, authenticity, and relatability. The empathy aesthetic now shows the messiness of the actual human experience rather than the polished final product.

And then, of course, there's work. Just like empathy, the workplace has drastically changed over the past century and a half, as discussed in Chapter 3. And empathy at work went from non-existent to irrelevant to "maybe a good idea" to a core brand aesthetic for building trust and psychological safety. Organizations now visibly prioritize mental health, work-life balance, and active community engagement projects to project an empathetic image.



REMEMBER

Empathy has gone through many iterations. It's been an aesthetic. A skill. A trait. A feeling. A good idea. A bad idea (toxic empathy, anyone?). A point of contention. A manipulation tactic. And a strategy. But what's always been is a feeling. And not necessarily something you feel inside of yourself, but a feeling used to understand others: their situation, their perspective, and their feelings.

That's what I want you to take with you as you dive into the various chapters of this book. We are all capable of empathy, but your focus needs to be on the desire to pursue it.

Reframing Leadership as a Relationship

The social contract between employer and employee looks fundamentally different to it did even a single generation ago. Gone are the days when command-and-control leadership was the tried-and-true method of functional leadership (see Chapter 3). Workers in today's knowledge economy demand agility and innovation with very little interest in just compliance. Employees now need to feel empowered in their decision-making capabilities. Many of them thrive in creative environments where they can bounce ideas off of each other and explore innovative ways to accomplish their goals. This requires a leader who sees each member of their team as their own person, and not just one part of a larger group.



REMEMBER

Research consistently shows that the majority of employees are disengaged at work, and the primary driver is their relationship with their direct-line manager. It's for this reason that empathy in the workplace isn't a trend, but a response to a real shift in what people need from work and from the people who lead them.

Knowing how empathy fits in with good leadership

Many people believe that empathy is an add-on to solid leadership. They're wrong. What's true is that no other function of leadership works without it because every part of leadership depends on *people*.



REMEMBER

Leadership, at the end of the day, is human. Unfortunately, that's not what we're taught. Most leadership frameworks focus on strategy, vision, execution, and accountability. Those things matter, but none of them function at their highest level without empathy. And people don't follow systems; they follow leaders who make them feel understood. Need proof? Here it is:

» **Empathy makes you a better performer — in your boss's eyes, too.**

Leadership development non-profit the Center for Creative Leadership analyzed data from 6,731 mid- to upper-level managers across 38 countries and found that managers who practiced empathetic leadership toward direct reports were viewed as better performers by their own bosses. Empathy doesn't just make your team feel good; it makes you look more effective up the chain (www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/empathy-in-the-workplace-a-tool-for-effective-leadership).

» **Empathy drives creativity and engagement.** A 2021 study by global non-profit member organization Catalyst (www.catalyst.org/en-us/about/newsroom/2021/empathic-leaders-drive-employee-engagement) of nearly 900 United States employees found that workers with highly empathetic senior leaders reported higher levels of creativity (61 percent) and engagement (76 percent), compared to just 13 percent and 32 percent respectively among those with less empathetic senior leaders.

» **Empathy is a business imperative, not a soft skill.** A 2023 EY (formerly known as Ernst & Young) Empathy in Business Survey of more than 1,000 employed United States workers found that mutual empathy between company leaders and employees leads to increased efficiency (88 percent), creativity (87 percent), job satisfaction (87 percent), idea sharing (86 percent), innovation (85 percent), and even company revenue (83 percent). Chapter 2 discusses why empathy shouldn't be referred to as a "soft skill."

» **Empathy improves team performance and productivity.** Researchers at Durham University and Athens University found that managers who lead with empathy are more likely to increase their team's performance and

productivity (www.durham.ac.uk/business/news-and-events/news/2025/04/empathetic-leaders-get-best-out-of-remote-workers). And that's particularly true for remote and hybrid workers, who felt closer to managers who showed genuine care and clearly communicated their vision.

» **Empathy directly impacts retention.** Catalyst's 2021 research (www.catalyst.org/en-us/about/newsroom/2021/empathic-leaders-drive-employee-engagement) found that senior leader empathy is directly linked to employee retention, and women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups specifically experience less burnout when they have more empathetic senior leaders. Empathy is not just a universal good but also an equity issue.

Realizing why empathy fits in with good leadership

Hundreds of statistics explain why empathy is so impactful for running successful enterprises (and trust me, there will be examples sprinkled through this book), but what about *you*? How would being an empathetic leader directly impact your day-to-day life? And how would that impact affect your team?



TIP

As you go through the following list, consider the specific people on your team or in your organization that you engage with consistently. Because when you lead with empathy — both as a manager of people and as a person yourself — this is your true impact.

Here's what that impact actually looks like, day to day, when you lead the people directly in front of you:

» **Your team feels safe enough to tell you the truth.** Most leaders think they have a pretty good read on their team. What they actually have, however, is a read on what the team wants that leader to see. And usually what they want you to see is what they are most comfortable with sharing. Those two things are rarely aligned. When people don't feel psychologically safe, they struggle to solve problems; instead, they smooth them over until they become crises. When you lead with empathy, people stop performing for you and start being honest with you. And honest teams make better decisions, catch problems earlier, and trust you enough to follow you through hard things. I unpack this more in Chapter 10, which discusses empathetic communication.

- » **Your team stops spending energy on self-protection and spends it on the work instead.** Every team has an invisible tax. It's the energy people spend managing their image, hiding their struggles, anticipating your reaction, and figuring out what's safe to say. That tax doesn't show up on any report, but it costs you enormously in creativity, focus, and discretionary effort. Empathetic leadership reduces that tax. When people feel seen and understood, they stop bracing for impact and start bringing their full selves to the work.
- » **Your team feels like *they* matter, not just their output.** A profound difference exists between being valued for what you produce and being valued as a person. Most employees have experienced both, and they know the difference immediately. When a leader demonstrates genuine curiosity about someone's experience — not just their performance — it changes how that person shows up. They're more loyal, more committed, and more willing to go beyond what's required. Not because they were told to, but because they actually want to. This is perspective-taking in action, and Chapter 9 dissects the ins and outs of this.
- » **Your team gives you the benefit of the doubt.** Every leader makes hard calls. Delivers bad news. Makes decisions that not everyone will like. The difference between a team that trusts you through those moments and one that falls apart is almost entirely relational. When people believe — based on lived experience — that you genuinely understand and care about their experience, they extend you grace when things are hard. They assume good intent, and they are much more likely to stick around for the long haul.
- » **Your team becomes more empathetic with each other.** Empathy is contagious. So, when you model genuine curiosity, active listening, and you care for people's experience, your team starts doing it too. They do it with their peers, with other departments, and with your customers. You are building more than just a relationship with your team; you're building your team's culture. And that culture will outlast any single decision, initiative, or difficult quarter. See the nearby sidebar, "The Empathy Impact."



REMEMBER

When your team feels seen, everything shifts. Not just their performance: their relationship to the work, to each other, and to you. That shift doesn't happen because of a policy or a program. It happens because of how you choose to show up. Your team performs at the level of how safe they feel, and how safe they feel is entirely up to you.

THE EMPATHY IMPACT

Empathy doesn't stay where you put it; it's spreads and grows and connects and flourishes. It touches not only the person you are engaging with, but everyone they engage with because everything you do has a broader impact on the world at large. When a leader practices empathy genuinely and consistently, it moves from the individual to the team, from the team to the organization, from the organization to every customer it touches. Here's what that progression actually looks like:

- **On individuals.** Empathy changes how people experience work at the most personal level. Feeling seen by a leader is one of the strongest predictors of engagement, discretionary effort, and well-being.
- **On teams.** Teams with empathetic leaders take more risks, communicate more honestly, and recover from conflict faster. I discuss this in depth in Chapter 11.
- **In organizations.** Empathy at scale becomes culture. Organizations known for empathetic leadership outperform on retention, innovation, and customer satisfaction.
- **For customers.** Leaders who model empathy internally build teams that extend it externally. Customer empathy isn't a marketing strategy; it's a leadership outcome. The organizations that genuinely understand their customers are the ones whose leaders genuinely understand their people.

Establishing Empathy as a Core Value

Most people think of leadership as a position — a title, a level, a set of responsibilities — and, in many ways, it is. Careers advance to leadership when the individual climbing that ladder has achieved something their peers couldn't, and that is a moment of great pride. But the real work of leadership is in the relationships; namely, between the person leading and the people being led. And, like every relationship in life, it is only as strong as the understanding that runs through it.



REMEMBER

The question isn't whether empathy matters in leadership; you're reading this book, so you are very much aware of empathy's value. The question is whether you're willing to hold it as a core value; not a strategy you deploy when it's convenient, but a genuine commitment that shapes how you lead even when it costs you something. For example:

- » **As a leader.** A core value isn't something you perform when it's convenient. It's something that guides decisions when it's hard. What does it actually look

like to hold empathy as a non-negotiable in your leadership, especially when you're under pressure? When someone is frustrating you? When the business case for the faster, colder decision seems obvious?

For me, empathy became a core value when I saw how the result of not being empathetic impacted my career and — more importantly — my relationships. Your reasons will be your own. But the leaders who hold empathy most consistently are almost always the ones who can trace it back to something personal — a moment where being seen, or not being seen, changed something for them. Chapter 7 breaks down how to define your goals as an empathetic leader, and it's a great place to start if you're itching to change quickly.

» **In the workplace.** Personal commitment is the starting point. But it isn't enough on its own. The goal isn't just to be an empathetic leader — it's to build a workplace where empathy is the shared operating system, where it isn't dependent on any one person's good intentions, and where it doesn't disappear when you're not in the room.

This is cultural. How do you move empathy from a personal commitment to a shared one? That's the difference between empathy as a personal virtue and empathy as a cultural value. And making that shift is one of the hardest and most important things a leader can do. Empathy that lives only in relationships is fragile.

Empathy that gets built into how decisions get made, how feedback gets collected, how conflict gets addressed, and how new people get welcomed — that's empathy that lasts. Part 3 of this book discusses the actions involved when leading with empathy, and how to build those structures.



REMEMBER

A culture of empathy — both as an individual and in the workplace — is never an accident. It is intentionally built through goal setting, identifying and closing your gaps, and making it a part of who you are. It's a choice that gets made over and over again, at every level of an organization — as well as at every turn in your own personal journey — until it becomes simply the way things are done here.

Understanding the Loneliness of Leading without Empathy

I never set out to teach empathy. In fact, I never set out to teach anything. I began my career as a writer; as an avid reader in my childhood, I fell in love with storytelling and I wanted to pursue that passion as an adult. Unfortunately, I had an enormous roadblock to getting my writing career to where I wanted it to be: my

speech impediment. I'm a person who stutters, and I spent the majority of my life internally struggling with how I sounded. I was both terrified of people but craved the community of others; I avoided talking (to avoid stuttering) but teeming with so many things I wanted to say, and had big goals for my career but not enough gumption to put myself out there to actually grow it. I was trapped in a vicious cycle, and I struggled for close to a decade with how to break free.

It was a speech therapist I was seeing at the time who talked some sense into me. Her name was Stephie, and she was also a stutterer. In our first session, she told me that she could help me make stuttering easier and less noticeable through various techniques. And they would absolutely work, but first I had to be okay with stuttering. I thought she was a quack. How can anyone be comfortable with being different? With struggling to say simple words? With constantly exposing their greatest insecurity?

It didn't seem possible, but I decided to give it a shot anyway. I asked her how to get comfortable with stuttering. She suggested I give public speaking a try. This wasn't a means of developing a new skill, it was exposure therapy. If I spoke and stuttered in front of a large group of people about the thing that made me feel the most vulnerable — stuttering — it would become less scary.

It took a while for me see it — I'm talking about a decade of being a professional speaker — but she was right. I do feel more comfortable stuttering; it doesn't bother me as much and I have come a long way in divorcing my speech from a lot of the negative feelings I attached to it for so long.

Public speaking — and teaching companies, teams, and audiences about empathy — did so much more than just rehab my relationship with my speech; it created an environment for real connection to thrive. As you read this book, I'll share more experiences about stuttering and how it taught me empathy. I hope that, as it has done for many audiences around the world, those stories will help you better understand and embrace empathy in your own right.



TIP

This book focuses on leading with empathy from the leadership — corporate — perspective; but, for a moment, I want you to focus on leading with empathy as individual — not for your team, but for you. In your conversations. In your relationships. In your life in general. Do you lead with empathy? If you aren't sure; that's okay. One of the first things you must do to practice empathy is to be self-aware, so being honest about how you are actually leading is important. What I learned before and during my journey into speaking was that leading without empathy was an incredibly lonely decision. I was leading with fear, pride, and shame around my speech, and I allowed those feelings to guide me away from others and toward a life of isolation. I was so deeply invested in my own insecurities and vulnerabilities that I created an environment where no one felt comfortable connecting. I had no empathy; therefore, I had no community.



WARNING

You may not realize a decline in empathy is happening, because the absence of empathy in leadership rarely announces itself. More often it looks like a leader who is competent, well-intentioned, and genuinely confused about why their team keeps underperforming, disengaging, or leaving. Here's what this looks like in practice:

- » **You make the same mistakes repeatedly.** Without empathy, you're working with an incomplete model of the people around you. You don't fully understand what motivates them, what's getting in their way, or how your behavior lands on them. So, you keep pulling the same levers and getting surprised when they don't work. The problem isn't your strategy; it's your data.
- » **Your best people leave and you never see it coming.** This is one of the most consistent and costly symptoms of low-empathy leadership. Top performers don't storm out. They quietly disengage first — they stop volunteering ideas, stop going above and beyond, stop investing in the team's success. By the time they hand in their resignation, they've been gone for months. And because no one felt safe enough to tell you what was happening, you never had the chance to fix it.
- » **You have authority but not influence.** People do what you ask because they have to, not because they want to. There's an enormous performance gap between those two things. Compliance gets you the minimum. Commitment gets you everything people are capable of. Low-empathy leaders almost always have the first and wonder why they can't seem to get the second. I discuss this in detail in Chapter 12.
- » **You confuse busyness with impact.** Low-empathy leaders often work incredibly hard. They're executing, delivering, and hitting numbers. But they're frequently disconnected from the human experience of the work — from what it actually feels like to be on their team. And over time, that disconnection shows up in the metrics that matter most: retention, engagement, innovation, and the kind of sustained performance that only comes from people who genuinely want to be there. Part 4 of this book explains how to measure your capabilities as an empathetic leader and your team's growth.
- » **You feel increasingly isolated.** This one's the biggie; I learned it the hard way, and I know how painful it feels. When you operate from authority or distance, you end up surrounded by people but genuinely alone. No one tells you the truth. No one is even comfortable having a real conversation with you. No one pushes back or gives you different ideas. You make decisions in a vacuum and wonder privately why they keep missing the mark. Isolation is the cost of the distance you created because you didn't invest in empathy. Head to Chapter 10 to discover more about forming lasting, sincere connections with others through empathetic communication.

DISRUPTING THE NORM: THE SACRED CLOWN

The highest form of empathy is the Heyoka. Originating from the Lakota Sioux culture and tradition, the *Heyoka* — roughly translating as “sacred clown” — was known somewhat as a spiritual fool. They acted as an emotional mirror to the tribes they visited; they reflected people’s emotions and hidden dynamics back to them, offering great personal growth along with a big dose of discomfort. Their unorthodox perspective aimed to break people out of their rigid ways so they could view the world differently.

The Heyoka never had the intention of disrupting — of being a contrarian — but their energy shifted the surrounding environment. They forced people to examine their own doubts, fears, hatreds, and weaknesses. And while doing so, they remained both emotionally detached and authentic. The detachment served as an objective catalyst for healing, and their authenticity protected them from being deceived.

The Heyoka’s entire function was to help a community see itself more clearly. Their goal was to shake people up when they got too comfortable, too conformist, or too afraid to acknowledge things directly. In a culture with a strong group identity and a hefty social pressure to conform with others (Chapter 11 examines empathy in groups), the Heyoka reveled in their “sacred” role of breaking the patterns. This wasn’t out of rebellion but out of service to the community’s health and well-being. And they could say what no one else would dare to say because they didn’t need permission. Heyoka’s were true leaders. Not through authority, strategy, or vision, but through understanding. They were deeply, radically committed to surfacing what the community wasn’t capable of seeing on its own. The disruption was the medicine. The discomfort was the point.

I think about the Heyoka a lot when I think about what empathetic leadership actually requires. No, great leaders aren’t clowns — though a sense of humor is always a good idea — but because the Heyoka reminds us that genuine empathy has never been the soft option. It has always been the brave one. It takes more courage to stay curious than to stay comfortable, more discipline to listen than to direct, and more strength to make someone feel seen than to simply make them comply. And, maybe most importantly, it takes some levity to question why we have the stances we do about ourselves and about others. Yes, leadership is serious; it’s also human. And that’s my ultimate goal for you in this book: humanity.

To create conditions where truth-telling is safe; where the quietest voice in the room is on equal footing as the loudest; where it’s safe to dissent and invite uncomfortable perspectives; where people feel protected when they say something nobody else is brave enough to; and where teams feel confident enough not just to perform empathy, but to

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build it into their relationships, their structures, and their culture. Because when teams do that, they are doing something ancient. Something that communities have always needed from the people willing to lead them. That's what this book is about. Not leadership that looks good from the outside, but leadership that actually works from the inside out. And it starts, as it always has, with the willingness, the curiosity, and the self-awareness, to genuinely understand the people you're asking to follow you.



REMEMBER

The cost of leading without empathy hardly ever shows up all at once. It's slow and ruminates below the surface. It's quiet, eroding trust over a long period of time. Leaders who operate with empathy gradually start losing access to the truth. By the time the loss of empathy is visible, you've lost your team.