



## In Trying Times, Empathy Should Prevail

Teach managers to empathize, even when their hair is on fire.

BY ERIC GIRARD

**V**UCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and it describes the world we live in today—a situation of constant, unpredictable change that is now the norm in most of the business world. Lingering effects of the pandemic, fears of a recession, climate change, political instability, inflation, personal and financial pressures, and microaggressions are all powerful external factors that, on top of the pressures of the job, put immense stress on employees at all levels. Managers, however, have the added burden of dealing with those stressors within their teams and in their own lives.

If companies want to keep their teams whole and functioning effectively, managers must learn to lead their teams through these times with genuine empathy. As an L&D professional, you can play a

vital role in teaching those skills and embedding genuine empathy in your corporate culture. But doing so requires a shift away from traditional management approaches.

While surveys suggest that many CEOs and other C-suite executives understand the value of empathy, it may not be an easy sell at the manager level, which may view empathy as nebulous at best and a sign of weakness at worst (some people were taught that work and life are separate things and that they should leave their feelings at home). Your company's managers face deadlines and pressures from above and below on any normal day, and empathy and empathy training are likely the furthest things from their minds. Throw them into a crisis, and empathy can go right out the door at great risk to individual teams and the organization.

For L&D professionals, communicating a clear approach and the measurable benefits of empathy can help overcome those headwinds.

### Why empathy matters

The most significant benefit of empathy is employee retention. Given the high cost of turnover, empathy makes good financial sense to support organizational teams.

According to the NeuroLeadership Institute, "calls for empathetic leadership are on the rise, with one survey linking a lack of empathy to the reason 54 percent of people are quitting." BusinessSolver puts an even finer point on the situation, stating that "90 percent of employees say they're more likely to stay with a company that understands and empathizes with their needs."

The bottom line is that in a culture that doesn't embrace empathy, employees vote with their feet. Workers expect support and flexibility during difficult times as well as empathetic leaders to meet that need. Given that, empathetic leaders are significant in helping their companies attract, retain, and support high-performing people, especially during times of crisis, volatility,

and uncertainty. Likewise, empathetic leaders are influential to their team members' health and well-being, differentiate themselves from other leaders, and make their companies more competitive.

Empathy also contributes to increased productivity. The BusinessSolver report found that the same 90 percent of employees likely to stay at their jobs

## The most significant benefit of empathy is employee retention.

will likewise be more engaged and motivated to do well. To put that in measurable terms, happy employees are as much as 20 percent more productive than employees who described themselves as disengaged, depressed, anxious, or burned out, according to a Social Market Foundation study. Further, an Engagement Institute study reveals that American companies lose up to \$550 billion annually because of disengaged workers.

Those findings underscore the importance of teaching managers and team leaders to interact empathetically with their direct reports and team members, respectively, and to model those behaviors consistently—even under the most trying circumstances. When managers do so, it results in keeping good, high-performing teams in place and avoiding the disruptions of turnover while achieving (or exceeding) business objectives and creating lasting bonds of trust, respect, and accountability.

### What genuine empathy is and is not

People often confuse empathy with sympathy or kindness when, in fact, it is neither. Sympathy is a natural and genuine response to someone else's condition but doesn't go beyond simply feeling sorry for them. Sympathy may motivate an individual to try and cheer up a col-

league by focusing on the positive, but that can make the colleague feel like the individual is not hearing them. In the worst-case scenario, sympathy can be interpreted as "Wow, sucks to be you!"

Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, describes empathy as "feeling *with* people" rather than

just feeling about people. Empathy is distinct from sympathy because an empathetic leader is closely attuned to the other person. It requires an investment in valuing a whole person by:

- Showing genuine interest in and awareness of employees' or team members' lives
- Being able to identify with employees or putting themselves in employees' shoes
- Being an active and attentive listener
- Validating workers' concerns in a nondismissive way
- Identifying and considering workers' feelings and needs and responding appropriately
- Sharing, authentically, who they are in return

It's also important for you to emphasize that empathy does not mean giving up accountability. Leaders must still achieve business outcomes, and it is possible to give kind, empathetic feedback and coaching that leaves the staff member feeling heard and respected, even when prescribing corrective behavior or taking disciplinary action. Unfortunately for most managers, knowing how to straddle that line is not instinctive. As C-suite executives continue to put more value and importance on empathy, managers may feel overwhelmed and poorly equipped.

## Teaching empathy in management development

Good empathy training courses exist, but you can jump-start the learning by using a few fundamental building blocks as a start.

**Help managers learn to understand their own emotions.** One technique is for managers to keep a journal in which they name the emotions they experience daily (or hourly) and build on their vocabulary of emotions over time. The idea is that, as managers learn how to identify their own emotional states, it becomes easier for them to understand what someone else may be experiencing and respond correctly.

**Use a personality assessment tool.** You can offer, for example, DISC—which ranks individuals in the four personality types (dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness)—or a similar assessment to managers and their teams, who should compare and discuss the results together. Doing so builds trust and equips the entire team with knowledge they can use to better communicate with and understand each other.

**Instruct managers on asking questions and active listening.** The key to good questions is making them open-ended rather than simple yes or no interrogatories. For example, “What’s wrong?” instead of “Are you OK?” Both questions may come from a genuine place of concern, but the open-ended question is more likely to lead to conversation.

One question that managers should always ask is “How can I help?” From there, active listening is a skill anyone can learn. It involves managers giving their employee their full attention (phone in a drawer, no multitasking, making eye contact); listening without judging, interrupting, or mentally preparing their response before the individual has finished speaking; paying attention to body language; asking the employee to clarify anything the manager is not sure they understand; and repeating back what they think they heard.

**Encourage managers to challenge their biases.** Unlike emotions and feelings, which are involuntary, people must choose to be empathetic. A manager’s ego, pressures, and schedules can quickly lead them to conclude that they are at work to do a job, not to be a psychologist or a babysitter. That, however, isn’t how a manager puts themselves in someone else’s shoes.

Part of being an effective manager must be a willingness to understand why a direct report is acting a certain way; how something is affecting the individual; and what they would be doing, thinking, and feeling if they were in the employee’s situation. Similarly, individuals naturally gravitate toward people they perceive to be similar to themselves. One of the best ways for someone to learn empathy is to spend time with people who are different from them, have dissimilar points of view, and come from

shoes. Managers can apply that to solving problems, managing conflict, and driving the development of new and innovative approaches to the job. Imagining a situation from a team member’s perspective can be a powerful tool for building empathy.

**Teach managers to validate how the other person is feeling.** Another key to managers showing empathy is letting employees know that what they’re feeling in a certain situation is completely OK. Doing so also shows compassion and makes their direct reports feel like they’re valued. However, managers may believe that validation can be difficult in some situations. In such cases, it’s sometimes fine for managers to say, “I don’t even know what to say right now; I’m just so glad you told me about it.”

**Foster a company culture that rewards empathy.** Incorporate empathy as a success factor in how employees rate their managers in annual reviews.

## Empathetic leaders are influential to their team members’ health and well-being.

varying backgrounds. Find ways to encourage that within your organization through, for example, shadowing programs and inviting guest speakers to share their perspectives.

**Motivate managers to build trust and collaboration among the entire team.** Understanding that one of the best ways to earn trust is to give it, managers should model asking for and offering help and supporting a collaborative team. Managers should commend team members for asking questions, encourage team walking meetings instead of virtual ones for more personal interaction, and foster a team dynamic outside the office.

**Promote genuine perspective-taking.** The Society for Human Resource Management’s Jeremy York suggests managers should consistently put themselves in their direct reports’

Finally, don’t forget that managers need empathy too. Their higher-ups are asking them to be more empathetic, but without the tools and skills managers need to meet that demand and do their jobs well, they’re stuck in a difficult position.

As an L&D practitioner, you can model empathy by acknowledging and responding to that need, which will garner tremendous return on investment for your organization. Ultimately, companies with a forward-looking approach to teaching, cultivating, and sustaining more empathetic managers will reap the greatest rewards in employee attraction and retention, stability, productivity, and profits.

**Eric Girard** is CEO of Girard Training Solutions; [eric@girardtrainingsolutions.com](mailto:eric@girardtrainingsolutions.com).



# SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

## Interested in subscribing to *TD* magazine?

### Rates

**\$180** Individual Domestic (US)

**\$331** Institutional Domestic (US)

**\$279** Individual International

**\$430** Institutional International

To subscribe, go to [td.org/TDsub](http://td.org/TDsub).

### Get even more when you become an **ATD** member!

All ATD memberships include a monthly subscription\* to *TD* magazine, plus access to webinars, digital publications, research, discounts on conferences, and much more.

**For details about ATD membership, visit [td.org/membership](http://td.org/membership).**

\*International members outside the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico receive the digital *TD* magazine as part of their membership.