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Connect with Empathy, But Lead with Compassion

by Rasmus Hougaard, Jacqueline Carter, and Marissa Afton

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Summary. For the past two years, leaders have been shouldering a big emotional burden: helping teams recover from the grief and loss of the pandemic, buoying the declining mental health of their employees, and being sensitive to people's anxieties. The empathy this... **more**

For close to two years, leaders have been thrust into the role of Counselor in Chief, helping teams recover from the grief and loss of the pandemic, buoying the declining mental health of their

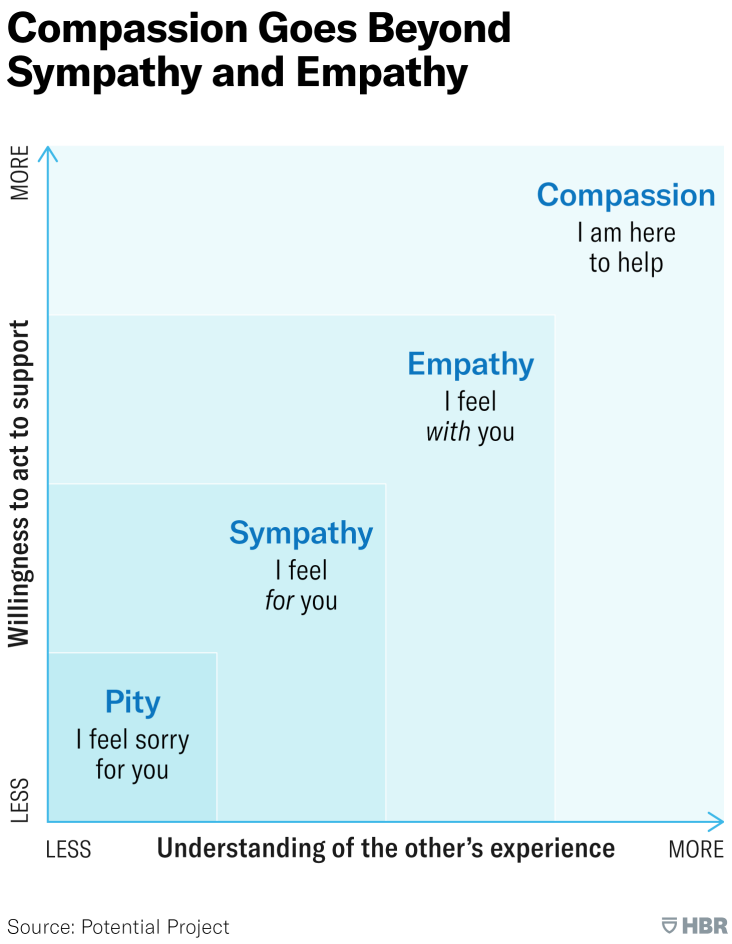
employees, being sensitive to people's anxieties and often publicly sharing their own vulnerabilities along the way. In short, they have been shouldering a big emotional burden.

Of course, this kind of empathy is important for good leadership. But too much of it can be a problem, weighing you down. So when we tell leaders that, actually, they don't have to take the difficulties of the people they lead onto themselves, this is a huge burden lifted off their shoulders.

Instead of carrying that burden of empathy, you can learn to experience the uplifted experience of compassion. This is a massive shift in how leaders engage with their teams, a shift that greatly benefits all sides. It begins with understanding the difference between empathy and compassion.

Empathy and Compassion: What's the Difference?

Let's start with some definitions. The words "empathy" and "compassion," as well as "sympathy," are sometimes used interchangeably. They all represent positive, altruistic traits, but they don't refer to the exact same experience. It is helpful to consider the two distinct qualities of compassion: understanding what another is feeling, and the willingness to act to alleviate suffering for another. The following image visually distinguishes compassion from the similar experiences of empathy, sympathy, and pity.



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At the bottom left, we have pity. When we experience pity, we have little willingness to act and little understanding of another's experience. We simply feel sorry for them. Moving up the chart to the right, we experience sympathy. There is a small increase in our willingness to help and our understanding of the other. We feel *for* the other person.

Moving up one more level, we come to empathy. With empathy, we have a close, visceral understanding of the other person's experience. We feel *with* the person. We literally take on the emotions of the other person and make those feelings our own. Though a noble thing to do, it does not necessarily help the other person, except for possibly making them feel less lonely in their experience.

Finally, at the top right, we have a good understanding of what the other person is experiencing *and* a willingness to act. Our understanding of the other person's experience is greater than with empathy because we pull on our emotional awareness as well as rational understanding. Compassion occurs when we take a step away from empathy and ask ourselves what we can do to support the person who is suffering. In this way, compassion is an intention versus an emotion.

Why Does This Matter?

Paul Polman, former CEO of Unilever, puts it this way: "If I led with empathy, I would never be able to make a single decision. Why? Because with empathy, I mirror the emotions of others, which makes it impossible to consider the greater good."

Paul is right. Even with its many benefits, empathy can be a poor guide for leaders.

Empathy often helps us do what's right, but it also sometimes motivates us to do what's wrong. Research by Paul Bloom, professor of cognitive science and psychology at Yale University and author of *Against Empathy*, discovered that empathy can distort our judgment. In his study, two groups of people listened to the recording of a terminally ill boy describing his pain. One group was asked to identify with, and feel for, the boy. The other group was instructed to listen objectively and not engage emotionally. After listening to the recording, each person was asked whether they would move the boy up a prioritized treatment list managed by medical doctors. In the emotional group, three-quarters of participants decided to move him up the list against the opinion of medical professionals, potentially putting sicker individuals at risk. In the objective group, only one-third of the participants made the same recommendation.

As leaders, empathy may cloud our judgment, encourage bias, and make us less effective at making wise decisions. However, it should not be completely avoided. A leader without empathy is

like an engine without a spark plug — it simply won't engage. Empathy is essential for connection and then we can leverage the spark to lead with compassion.

And herein lies the challenge for most leaders: we tend to get trapped by our empathy, making us unable to shift to compassion.

Avoiding the Empathy Trap — and Leading with Compassion

Overcoming an empathetic hijack is a critical skill for any leader. In mastering this skill, you must remember that shifting away from empathy does not make you less human or less kind. Rather, it makes you better able to support people during difficult times. Here are six key strategies for using empathy as a catalyst for leading with more compassion.

Take a mental and emotional step away.

To avoid getting caught in an empathetic hijack when you are with someone who is suffering, try to take a mental and emotional step away. Step out of the emotional space to get a clearer perspective of the situation and the person. Only with this perspective will you be able to help. By creating this emotional distance, you may feel like you are being unkind. But remember you are not stepping away from the person. Instead, you are stepping away from the problem so you can help solve it.

Ask what they need.

When you ask the simple question "What do you need?" you have initiated a solution to the issue by giving the person an opportunity to reflect on what may be needed. This will better inform you about how you can help. And for the suffering person, the first step toward being helped is to feel heard and seen.

Remember the power of non-action.

Leaders are generally good at getting stuff done. But when it comes to people having challenges, it is important to remember that in many instances people do not need your solutions; they need your ear and your caring presence. Many problems just need to be heard and acknowledged. In this way, taking "non-action" can often be the most powerful means of helping.

Coach the person so they can find their own solution.

Leadership is not about solving problems for people. It is about growing and developing people, so they are empowered to solve their own problems. Avoid taking this life-learning opportunity away from people by straight-up solving their issues. Instead, coach them and mentor them. Show them a pathway to finding their own answers.

Practice self-care.

Show self-compassion by practicing authentic self-care. There is a cost to managing one's own feelings to better manage others. Often called emotional labor, the task of absorbing, reflecting, and redirecting the feelings of other people can be overwhelming. Because of this, we as leaders must practice self-care: take breaks, sleep, and eat well, cultivate meaningful relationships, and practice mindfulness. We need to find ways of staying resilient, grounded, and in tune with ourselves. When we show up in the workplace with these qualities, people can lean on us and find solace and comfort in our well-being.

This article is adapted from Compassionate Leadership: How to do Hard Things in a Human Way *by Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter (Harvard Business Review Press 2022).*

Rasmus Hougaard is the founder and CEO of Potential Project, a global leadership,

organizational development and research firm serving Microsoft, Accenture, Cisco and hundreds of other organizations. He is coauthor, with Jacqueline Carter, of *Compassionate Leadership: How to Do Hard Things in a Human Way* and *The Mind of the Leader: How to Lead Yourself, Your People, and Your Organization for Extraordinary Results*.

Jacqueline Carter is a partner and the North American Director of Potential Project. She is the coauthor, with Rasmus Hougaard, of *Compassionate Leadership: How to Do Hard Things in a Human Way* and *The Mind of the Leader – How to Lead Yourself, Your People, and Your Organization for Extraordinary Results*.

Marissa Afton is an organizational psychologist and a Partner and the head of Global Accounts at Potential Project. She is a contributing coauthor of *Compassionate Leadership: How to Do Hard Things in a Human Way* by Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter.