

# Leading the way to an empathetic workplace



This toolkit aims to assist leaders and managers to establish an empathetic work culture by promoting and cultivating empathy in the workplace.

It will help leaders and managers to understand **why** an empathetic work culture is good for business and **how** to cultivate empathy at work.

## What is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It's understanding how others feel and being compassionate towards them.

Neuroscientists believe empathy is two parts of the brain working together:

1. the emotional centre which perceives the feelings of others, and
2. the cognitive centre which tries to understand why they feel that way and how we can be helpful to them.



## Isn't empathy the same as sympathy?

A common misperception is that empathy and sympathy are the same thing – they are not.

**Let's look at how they are different.**

**“Empathy fuels connection; sympathy drives disconnection.”**

Dr Brene Brown,  
TED talk 2013



**“I’m really struggling right now”**

Sympathetic response: ***I’m sorry to hear that, at least it’s a beautiful day outside.***

Empathetic response: ***I’m sorry to hear that. That sounds really tough, I can hear the distress in your voice.***

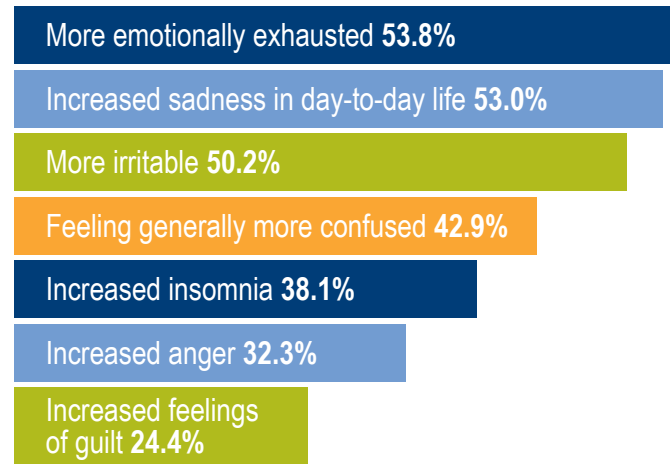
Sympathy involves **understanding a situation from your own perspective**, often accompanied by a wish for them to be happier or better off.

Empathy involves putting yourself in the other person’s shoes and understanding **WHY** they may have these particular feelings.

### **Why is empathy a must-have in today’s workplace?**

Many workplaces have reported experiencing increased levels of stress and burnout due to the COVID -19 pandemic. A 2020 Global Qualtrics survey comprised of 2,000 employees reported the following mental health issues since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak;

### **Mental health symptoms since COVID-19 outbreak**



*Source: Qualtrics Global Study: The other COVID19 Mental Health Crisis*

Most importantly, the Qualtrics study found that when workers perceived their managers to be more empathetic, they reported greater levels of mental health.

Taking time to empathise with a person who is upset, irritable, angry, or emotionally exhausted helps build connection and trust; two critical factors in managing difficult conversations well. Taking an empathic approach enables your staff to experience you as a genuine person, someone who seeks to understand their feelings or situation and who will use that understanding to help them achieve the best outcome.



***“The pandemic defied every management and organisational system, pushing everyone to their limits, until a transition toward agile, ever-evolving methods began to emerge... Perhaps the most telling realisation was that the key to survival in any catastrophe is empathy.”***

Inam ur Rahman, CEO Dawood Hercules 2021

Being empathic builds resilience in the workplace and contributes to positive outcomes at work. Empathy assists in managing difficult conversations by:

- allowing the person to express their emotions and be heard in a non-judgemental way, and by
- disarming and diffusing anger or negative feelings.

**Most people just want to be heard and acknowledged.**



***“Empathy is...communicating that incredibly healing message that you are not alone.”*** Dr Brene Brown

Empathy is a **useful skill** to learn – being open to other perspectives and being interested in what other people think, feel and experience makes you a great person to be around!

Giving people your full attention in meetings and being curious about their lives and interests are empathic behaviours that make others feel good and make us feel good too.

Building empathy helps us develop resilience by recognising how others have overcome their struggles which can encourage us to focus on what is possible.

When you feel a conversation is frustrating or defensive, the other person likely feels the same. Applying some empathy techniques can really help turn the conversation around.

## **How do you cultivate empathy at work?**

Understanding other people’s emotions is an important skill in the workplace. It can enable us to resolve conflicts, to build more productive teams, and to improve our relationships with co-workers, clients, and customers.

But, while most of us are confident about learning new technical skills, we may feel ill-equipped to develop our interpersonal skills and many people are self-conscious about discussing their own feelings, never mind anyone else’s.

## **Tips for increasing empathy skills**

### **Practise and develop empathy by:**

- not interrupting.
- not dismissing the person’s beliefs, even if you don’t share them.
- not being judgmental, accept that person’s views and reality, even if you can’t understand why or how they hold them.
- not talking too much in general.

### **Do more:**

- Active listening – Listen to understand, not to respond. Most of us spend half our time thinking about what we are going to say back to the person, this stops us giving our full attention to them.
- Resist the urge to have a response, most times an acknowledgement of what they have just said is enough.
- Pay attention to how something is being said, as well as what is being said. Tone and rhythm of speech can tell us much about the person, their mood and level of distress or frustration.

### Examples of how to respond:

- Thank you for sharing that with me.
- That sounds like that is really tough, how are you managing to cope with that?
- What do you think will be most helpful for you right now?
- Please tell me some more about that.



### Important final point:

Listening to others' stories can impact us, so it's important to look after our own wellbeing. It's important to make sure you debrief after difficult interactions and also that you operate within your boundaries at work by following organisation policy and procedures and Codes of Conduct.

One of the risks of caring is compassion fatigue or burnout so don't forget to look after yourself and practise **self-care** by:

- Seeking support at work by discussing and offloading difficult calls or situations. Talk it through with someone before you head home or log off for the day.
- Proactively check in on yourself and colleagues by noticing differences in mood, behaviour and thoughts. Seek support from colleagues, family or professionals.
- Looking after yourself – eat well, get good sleep, stay active, seek to minimise stress, connect with others, minimise use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Learning your triggers and vulnerabilities. Do certain types of situations push your buttons more than others? Think about why and what you can do to manage these situations differently.
- Identifying support networks and resources (at work and at home).
- Building self-awareness and understanding of your own mental wellbeing.

### Summary

You can develop these skills to be more empathetic and to take care of your own mental wellbeing over time. It is a process of ongoing practice and improvement. You can also undertake training to understand more and learn from others.

Lifeline provides training with practical strategies to support yourself, colleagues, friends and family.

Visit our website to find out more.

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-involved/workplace-training/>

### Reference links

*Empathy is the Most Important Leadership Skill According to Research*

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/09/19/empathy-is-the-most-important-leadership-skill-according-to-research/?sh=1a9820f33dc5>

*The Other COVID-19 Crisis*

[The Other COVID-19 Crisis: Mental Health // Qualtrics](#)

