

Empathy Driven Leadership

Cultivating Compassionate and Empathetic Leadership During a Time of Social Unrest



Ascension EAP
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Introduction

I am filled with anger and heartache as I watch the ongoing racism within the United States explode into the streets across every state. Colossal changes are needed to address the issues faced by people of color, as well as all others who are facing discrimination on a daily basis. Many leaders and authority figures are at a loss at how to appropriately take responsibility and action in support of those that feel marginalized and discriminated against. We must confront discrimination and injustice and make that a standard practice every day, not just when it explodes into marches, protests and rioting.

In this workbook you will find articles, worksheets and activities that will challenge you to confront your own biases to help you grow as a leader. You will learn how to support your associates with both empathy and compassion. Awareness, empathy, compassion and vulnerability are qualities that are critical for leaders to care for their associates during a crisis and journey down a path toward recovery and forgiveness.



Evaluate Your Stereotypes and Biases

Are you Biased?

A few days of arriving to work late, falling behind on projects, or a certain tone of voice can land an associate into hot water. How much? It could depend on the color of the skin, the gender of the employee, or what the employee looks like. In some organizations minority employees are more frequently put on corrective action plans. White employees and those of the majority populations, acting the same way are more likely to get off with a warning or a “slap on the wrist”. You may have heard terminology such as “mommy tracked” or “glass ceiling” to refer to the discrepancies that women face in today’s working society.

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that though people will explicitly say that they are not racist or biased (and truly believe that to be true!), their behavior says otherwise. (Check out the article, [The Bias Beneath: Two Decades of Measuring Implicit Associations](#) for a quick glance at some of this research.)

This does not mean that leaders and administrators are racist or against equal rights for all. At least, most do not intend to be discriminatory against others. The majority want what is best for all their associates, no matter what their race, ethnicity, gender, weight, sexual orientation or religion might be. Many leaders and administrators believe that they treat all employees equally because they are unaware of their unconscious beliefs.

These unconscious beliefs are called biases and you cannot effectively lead and supervise others if you are unaware of your own. Everyone has them.

Consider this: You are at a restaurant with your family. How likely are you to A). Pay for your own children’s meals? B). Pay for the meals of other children in the restaurant? You probably answered that you were much more likely to pay for your own children’s meals, than other children in the restaurant, because you’re **BIASED** toward your own children, and **THAT’S OK!** (In fact, it would be a little strange if you weren’t). We all have biases, but the important thing is that we become aware of them as much as possible.



Effective leadership requires a certain level of professional self-knowledge. Achieving self-knowledge can be more complicated than it sounds, as it is difficult to admit to one's own weakness and mistakes.

The way you were raised and the experiences you had growing up help mold how you see, interpret, and judge the world. Your reflex is to judge the world as you see and experience it and not as it actually is. When you are busy and distracted, it is more likely that you will make decisions from your unconscious. In order to stop reacting to your biases you need to create the space for a timeout to analyze the source that is driving your unconscious judgments.

For example, consuming a lot of media where people of color are frequently portrayed as “thugs” might unconsciously make you leery about interacting with a black person you don't know. Or hearing Grandma tell you that a woman's place is in the kitchen may make you less likely to promote your female peers. Do you mean to have these biases? Of course not! But that's what makes them unconscious.

Do not worry! Here are some questions to ask yourself to get you started on the road to facing your own biases so that they do not continue to impact your ability to provide exceptional leadership:

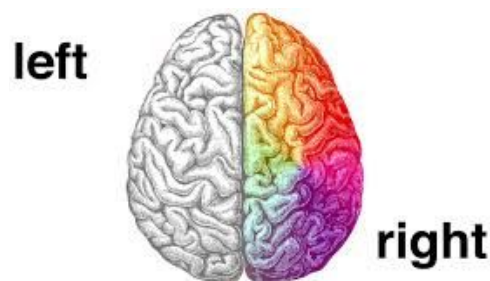
- When I see someone am I quick to make judgements about them?
- Do I have automatic feelings about this person?
- Does this person trigger a memory or remind me of someone in my past?
- Do I notice any patterns in my decision making that might be impacted by my biases?
- How might I consciously change so that my associate isn't affected by my bias?

Leading with Empathy

If someone were asked “what makes a great leader?” they would probably say things like integrity, creativity, accountability, commitment to the company, the ability to inspire and motivate others, goal orientated and a drive to succeed.

Not many would think to say that a great leader is one that has the ability to truly LISTEN with EMPATHY. Take a minute to think about a time in your life when you were really upset about a situation and spoke to someone that truly listened to you? How did you feel? You probably felt supported and it made you feel a little better about the situation, right? The simple act of listening can go a long way in easing an uncomfortable situation and help to bring emotions down to a manageable level.

Many leaders have a strong “left brain” orientation, which is why they excel in tasks, organization, and execution, but maybe feel overwhelmed when emotion and creativity are needed to remedy a situation. While the left part of your brain may be a well exercised machine, strengths in “right brain” functions (such as emotional awareness, creativity, and flexibility) allow truly strong leaders to stand out.



Try these exercises to strengthen your right brain!

Exercise #1: Connect with emotions. Imagine or pretend you won the lottery. Who is the first person you will tell and why? What are you going to buy? How do you feel about it?

Exercise #2: Tell a joke. Positive thoughts and laughter may boost creativity because it stimulates activity in the areas of the brain that are linked with emotions.

Exercise #3: Practice right brain activities. Color, draw, sing, read, play an instrument and describe what you love about it.

Any of these fun ideas could help strengthen your right brain.

We are all unique individuals and our workplace is filled with variety in that we have associates with diverse backgrounds including but not limited to: race, religion, gender, and sexual orientations. So, there are times that associates will come to you with issues that you may not know how to fix or respond to.

At these times leaders could make a situation worse if they fall back on normal responses such as trying to direct the conversation, talking too much, or thinking about what they will say next in defense of the situation. When you fail to listen with empathy, an associate may perceive that their feelings are not important. This could contribute to a work culture that is perceived as discriminatory.

So, what does listening with empathy mean? Empathetic listening is listening to another person with compassion, feeling and insight.

Make sure your employees feel that they are valued. Engage your employees in conversation and encourage them to share their opinions on all aspects of the work environment. Many leaders avoid emotional interactions because it feels uncomfortable, but the best leaders make themselves approachable and show empathy when their employees need support.

Here are some tips on listening with empathy:

- Be nonjudgmental: Do not seek to judge the situation or make harsh criticism
- Be aware of your own non-verbals (eye contact, facial expressions, body language and tone of voice) as well as those of your associates.
- Give the associate your undivided attention. Turn off your cell phone ringer and step away from your computer. Don't interrupt the associate and be a patient listener.
- Show that you are listening carefully by reflecting to the associate what you hear them say by restating and paraphrasing what you heard.
- Don't be afraid of silence. Silence is sometimes needed for processing thoughts and emotions.
- Be attentive by acknowledging and validating that their feelings are real.

Leading with empathy does not mean you agree with whatever the concern or situation is; it simply means that you are providing emotional support and validating their feelings.

Listening with empathy is an important cognitive and emotional tool that is strengthened over time. If you are interested in strengthening your ability to listen, practice empathetic listening activities frequently.

Empathetic Listening Exercise

Practice Being Present

In this activity we're going to practice really being attentive, and present in the moment. When we are truly present we not only hear what someone is saying, but we show respect and validation in our attentiveness.

Sit or stand still for a moment. Allow yourself to settle down by taking a couple of deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Notice five things that you can see. (This is the easy one). Example: I see my laptop, my phone, pictures of my kids, my door, and my desk.

Notice four things you can hear. (This one is a little harder as you must focus a little closer). Example: I can hear birds outside my window, a dog barking, the wind through the trees, and if I listen closely I can hear a clock ticking.

Notice three things you can feel. Example: I can feel the solid chair I'm sitting on, the smooth keys on my keyboard, and the breeze from an air conditioner blowing down on me.

Notice two things you can smell. (Ok, this is a hard one! Now you really need to pay attention.) Example: I can smell someone's reheated food which was slightly burned, and a little musty smell coming from an old book on my desk.

Notice one thing you can taste. Example: (I'll use my coworker's candy dish for this one.) I can taste a mint, it has a refreshing, cool and sweet taste.

This is an exercise you can practice any time you need to connect to the present moment. This activity can help you to recenter yourself.



Body Language

Body language is essential in relaying the messages we want to convey, as well as understanding others. If body language doesn't match spoken words it can be confusing, intimidating, or dismissive. Most people are so used to their own body language that we don't recognize our habits. Now it's time to pay attention! This exercise is one that works best with another person. You can practice with a spouse, child, coworker or friend. If you have no one available, practice with a mirror in a private place to feel comfortable.

First, write down something to relay to your partner. Some ideas would be:

- I am excited!
- I just saw something that really frightened me.
- I feel good about that meeting!
- I'm so proud of you.
- That didn't go the way I wanted it to.
- I am really mad.

Now, without words, give yourself one minute to try to relay the message to the other person without speaking. Utilize your face muscles, your mouth, eyes, hands and arms. Ask the person to tell you what they thought you were trying to say.

1. How close were they to what you had written down? What cues did they pick up on? What could you change to relay the message more clearly?
2. Now change roles and pay attention to the other person's body language. Notice all the details of their face, gestures, stance, etc. Could you guess the message they were trying to relay? What did you focus on? Was there anything distracting you from the message they were trying to relay?



Your Conversation Routine

Like it or not, we are creatures of habit. We develop our “go to” ways of communicating. If you find yourself frequently saying, “that’s not what I meant” or “that’s not the message I was trying to get across” or “I don’t know why people avoid conversations with me,” it might help to look at your conversation routine. Here are some questions to get you started. Read these questions and keep them at the forefront of your mind for the next day or so. Pay attention to how you are communicating. Then you may want to journal some of your responses to see what your routine or patterns are. It’s hard to change something you don’t recognize, and this exercise will help! See the worksheet below for questions and examples.

My communication habits worksheet

Below are some questions to consider in conversations you’ve recently had as a leader.



- Am I making eye contact?
- How am I standing?
- What am I doing with my hands?
- How loud is my voice?
- What is my face doing?
- Am I allowing for silence?
- Am I paying close attention, or is my mind wandering?
- Am I acknowledging what I hear?
- Am I validating emotions through words and body language?
- Am I summarizing what I hear?

Provide details for your answers. For example:

What were some observations I made?

It depended on the situation. I noticed that the busier and more stressed I was, I became more abrupt, and had a hard time focusing on what the person was saying. I’d think of my response and want to move on from the conversation. I also tend to look away when I am listening to people.

Is this a good habit, or did it cause any issues in relaying or hearing a message?

It could appear that I’m being dismissive. I might miss an important part of the conversation.

Is there anything I need to change?

I want to try and stay present, listen to the whole conversation and make better eye contact. If I am in a hurry or having a hard time focusing because of something else I need to do, I could tell the person that I want to resume the conversation when we have more time to talk.

Your turn!

- What were some observations I made?
- Is this a good habit, or did it cause any issues in relaying or hearing a message?
- Anything I need to change?

Red flags

If you want to be a leader who is trusted, valued and aware of bias, here are some examples of red flag behaviors in conversations. As you read through these, reflect on your own thoughts and behavior and be honest with yourself!

- I notice myself judging a person based on [hair style, clothing, skin tone, dialect, etc.]
- I notice myself assuming other people share the same perspective as I do, or that I share the same perspective as they do.
- I become defensive when my perspective is challenged.
- I come up with my response and discount everything else the person has said.
- I hear constructive feedback as a blow to my value as a leader or person.
- I do not acknowledge any biases.
- I make strong statements about current events that leave no room for differing ideas or opinions.
- I do not acknowledge that current events impact my associates or their work.
- I do not acknowledge my power differential because I want people to see me on their level.
- I am scared to acknowledge diversity on my team, or the strengths that diversity brings my team.
- I utilize the [black, brown, gay, Muslim, etc.] person on my team as the source of all knowledge in diversity.
- I do not acknowledge my own personal limitations in understanding a situation.
- If someone expresses negative feelings, I defend or make excuses rather than listen and acknowledge.

Now what? Maybe you've recognized that some of these red flags apply to you. Does that make you bad? Nope, it makes you human. But everyone has room to make changes and strive to be an empathetic and inclusive leader. Consult with your EAP or someone on your leadership team for more ideas, help and support in doing that.

I Think, I Can, I Will

Whether your department is small or large, being a leader is a tough job. Not only are you responsible for your own performance, and your associates' productivity and performance, but you are also responsible for inspiring, motivating, and empowering your entire team.

These responsibilities may weigh heavily on you at times. It may be difficult to avoid getting lost in the details of the day or feel as if you are drowning in responsibilities at times. It is challenging and maybe even impossible to support your staff in the way they need if you do not feel strong and capable.

To help you keep your head above the water I have collected these 10 quotes for you. You may have heard them before or seen them in a meme on social media, but they can be a mighty tool for empowering you in leadership.

1. *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."* - Maya Angelou
2. *"Fight for things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."* - Ruth Bader Ginsburg
3. *"Start where you are. Use what you can. Do what you can."* - Arthur Ash
4. *"Let go of the expectation that if you work on yourself enough, you won't struggle anymore. If you work on yourself enough, you'll understand what the struggle is for."* - Brianna Wiest
5. *"Be the change you wish to see in the world"* - Mahatma Gandhi
6. *"The life you live is the lesson you teach"* - Elizabeth Rider
7. *"Hate stirs up conflict, but love covers all wrongs."* - Proverbs 10:12
8. *"If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way."* - Martin Luther King, Jr.
9. *"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* - Maya Angelou
10. *"Let all that you do be done in love."* – 1 Corinthians 16:14

Perhaps you can add a few of your own quotes to the list:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

No matter how much stress you are under, or how disastrous a day you've had, always remember to take the time to step back and read through some of these quotes for inspiration. Repeat them each night before you go to sleep, put them on the dash of your car, doodle and meditate with them and put them somewhere that you see each day as a reminder that you are strong, you are capable, you are great!

Forgiveness

Mistakes? Yes, we have all made them. It's almost impossible to get through an entire day, week, or month without realizing you've made a mistake. Busy schedules, Google Hangout meetings, a chaotic work setting, and endless calls, all make mistakes even more likely. Some are small and easily fixed, however others can have a lasting impact when they unintentionally hurt someone.

As a leader it is your responsibility to support your staff, but what if you have inadvertently caused pain, made them feel as if they are not heard or that their feelings are not valued? Even when you don't mean to cause pain, your actions could send a message that you didn't intend to send. This mistake could negatively influence your relationship with associates, as well as impact your work culture.

Forgiveness is the key to overcoming mistakes

1. Forgiveness allows a positive work culture. When leaders are masterful at forgiveness it sets a precedent for others to make mistakes without harsh judgment or lingering grudges. Your department productivity and cohesiveness will inevitably improve.
2. Forgiveness allows you to learn and adapt. Don't feel held back by previous mistakes. Admitting to a mistake and forgiving yourself for it will allow you to open the lines of communication with your associates which builds trust and drives performance. Vulnerability is not weak; it's actually the sign of a very strong leader.
3. A forgiving work environment shows you authentically care. When you admit to your own mistakes your associates will feel as if they can come to you with concerns without feelings of shame or risking retribution. The work dynamic shifts from controlling to empowering.
4. And finally, forgiveness creates a higher level of integrity throughout the department. When forgiveness is a priority it fosters respect and allows your associates to become a team that is inclusive and accepting.



Forgiveness is an important tool to effectively change work culture. For this positive change to occur it must begin with leaders and slowly progress throughout the team. Forgiveness can be extremely difficult however, nurturing a culture where leaders and employees are willing to acknowledge their faults and apologize for them definitely helps.

Working Towards Forgiveness

One of the most significant hurdles to growth, healing, and progress is the inability to forgive. Here's how great leaders embrace forgiveness and move beyond feelings such as shame, anger and resentment.

When you forgive, you in no way change the past – but you sure do change the future.

- Bernard Meltzer

Write about a mistake you have made with an associate:

How did this mistake make you feel?

What was the outcome?

Reflect on how many of the following actions were part of your response:

Acknowledgement. Acknowledging a mistake is the first step towards correcting it and finding ways to prevent it from happening again.

Acceptance. Everyone makes mistakes. When we accept that mistakes are a normal part of being human we become open to accepting that others too will make mistakes.

Apology. Admitting to a mistake and taking responsibility for it helps your associates trust you.

Adjust. We are usually hardest on ourselves. It's important to be kind to yourself and don't forget that the judgment of your mistakes should reflect the same level of empathy you would show to others.

Apply. Applying what we learn from our mistakes to future situations can enable much better outcomes. Remember, mistakes are proof that we haven't given up!

If the mistake you journaled about did not have a positive outcome, is it because you missed a few of these action steps? Next time try to Acknowledge, Accept, Apologize, Adjust and Apply what you have learned!

Forgiveness is key to the healing process since it allows you to let go of the sadness, resentment, anger, shame, guilt, or any other feeling you may be experiencing and give you the push you need to move forward. Once you've become aware of your feelings, have given a voice to it and accepted your mistake, you'll begin to see how freeing forgiveness can be.

Advocate, Validate & Respond

Creating an inclusive work environment should be the goal for every organization. An inclusive workplace is one that values individual differences, has a diverse population of employees and makes all employees feel supported regardless of their background or circumstances.

The lack of diversity in organizations is not simply a hiring issue. Focusing on hiring more people of color and diverse backgrounds not only treats people as token minorities, it also makes those of the majority population feel as if they are not having equal access to employment opportunities, either. Increased numbers will not fix the culture and environment that excluded people of minority cultures in the first place; and it certainly will not eliminate cultural biases and stereotypes that make work environments feel discriminatory.

Instead, the real focus should be for leaders to create a culture that values, rewards, and supports individual differences as well as one that responds immediately to any allegation of discriminatory behavior. Work environments where all employees are held to the same standards and have leaders that advocate, validate and respond is a work culture that values equality. Understanding discrimination, culture bias, and stereotyping is an important step. Here are some examples:

- Overhearing an employee complain about a person being on government assistance but having an expensive cell phone.
- Not choosing an older employee to represent the company at a job fair because you feel a younger person would be better at recruiting.
- An employee making comments that implies that a Hispanic family won't pay their bill due to being illegal.
- Using any derogatory language about a person's religion, color, sexual orientation, financial status, gender, age, creed, etc.
- Implying that women are not fit for certain jobs.
- Making racial slurs or jokes about a Muslim patient and their hijab.

Have you or your employees encountered similar situations? Have you laughed at an "off colored joke?" Have you heard an employee say something derogatory about a race or religion and simply looked the other way? Have you had an employee complain about discrimination but did nothing to investigate or stop it?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, it's time for a change!

1. The first step is to be an advocate for your minority employees. Give them the same opportunities as you would any other employee--recommend them for projects and praise them to senior leadership. Most importantly tell them you are their advocate (and mean it!).
2. The second step is to validate your employees. Praising and rewarding accomplishments allows employees to see that their differences and hard work are valued and appreciated. It also empowers your employees to see that not only are they a part of the team but that their input is needed and important.
3. The final step is to respond! If an employee has a concern or complaint, investigate, follow-up, and take appropriate action to resolve the issue right away. However, you shouldn't wait for an issue to arise before taking steps to make your department safe and inclusive. Prevention is best, especially when it comes to your employees' well-being and safety. Strict policies against harmful and discriminatory behavior will help protect your employees and demonstrate that you have their back. So, make sure everyone knows what those policies are.

Diversity in the workplace is important and creating a culture where people from all backgrounds feel included needs to be a priority. Inclusivity is the key to creating a happy and healthy work culture. As leaders, when you advocate, validate and respond immediately and appropriately, you foster this inclusivity.

Conclusion

Today's inclusive leaders have the courage to admit mistakes. Leaders often feel like they can't make mistakes because of their position. But we're all human, we all make mistakes and these mistakes help us grow. Leaders who ask for forgiveness (when appropriate) move not only towards forgiving themselves and others but also strive to foster a work environment that is inclusive, diverse and safe from discrimination.

Also, leaders who are aware of their own biases are better equipped to handle workplace issues without causing additional harm. By focusing on developing strong empathetic listening skills and learning best practice for supporting your associates, you will make great strides in improving your work culture.

Improving diversity, inclusion and work culture in your department is not an overnight occurrence. This is complex and impacts every individual. It may not feel like you are making immediate progress in your efforts, but it's important to take time to slow down and ask for help when it's needed.



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