



# THE EVOLVING ROLE OF EMPATHY IN LEADERSHIP

*What's Changed and What to do about It?*

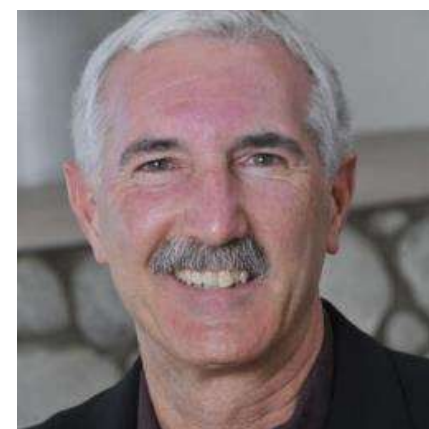


THE ENDURING LESSONS  
of **CONSULTING  
PSYCHOLOGY**

SCP 2024 Annual Conference | February 2-4, 2024 | Hyatt Regency | Austin, TX



Rob Kaiser



Dr. Kenneth Nowack



# Empathy (Salovey & Mayer, 1990)

A complex psychological phenomenon that can be defined simply as...

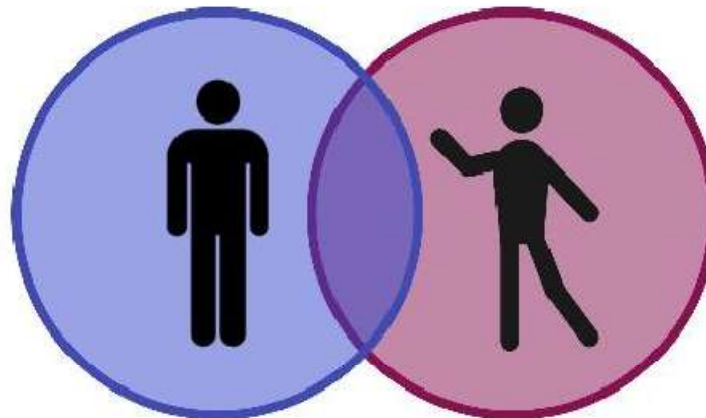
**“the ability to comprehend another’s feelings  
and to re-experience them oneself”**



# Empathy from 2 Perspectives (Clark et al., 2018)

## Expressed empathy as perceived by an Observer

*“You seem to care about  
me and my well-being.”*



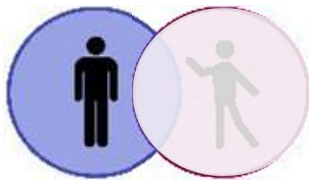
## Intrapsychic processes within an Actor

*“I get where you  
are coming from,  
I feel your pain,  
and I want to help.”*



# Expressed Empathy (Van der Graaff et al., 2016)

Judgments of empathy are inferred from observed behavior, primarily:



**Expressed empathy as perceived by an Observer**

*“You seem to care about me and my well-being.”*

## BEHAVIORAL MIRRORING

mimicking the gestures, mannerisms, and facial expressions of others

## EMPATHIC BEHAVIOR

actions that demonstrate one understands, shares, and is concerned about another's emotional state (e.g., providing instrumental, informational, emotional, & appraisal support)



# Internal Cognitive-Affective Processes (Nowack & Zak, 2020)

## EMPATHETIC PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Ventral medial prefrontal cortex/Temporoparietal junction (TPJ)

Other-related cognitions

Positive and negative affect

Good and Poor health/well-being

Sense of morality/Judgment

## EMPATHETIC DISTRESS

Anterior insula/Anterior middle cingulate cortex

Self-related emotion/behavior

Negative affect

Poor health/well-being

Withdrawal/Non-social behavior

## EMPATHETIC CONCERN

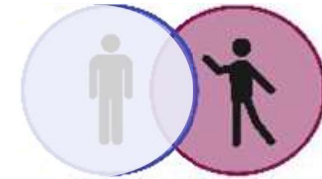
Medial orbitofrontal cortex (mOFC)/Striatum

Other related emotions/behaviors

Positive affect

Good health/well-being

Approach/Prosocial behavior



## Intrapsychic processes within an Actor

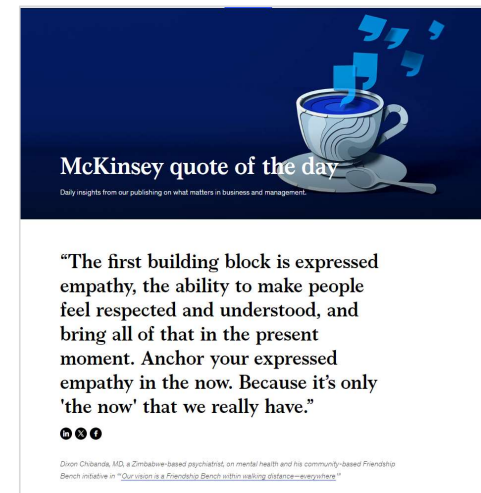
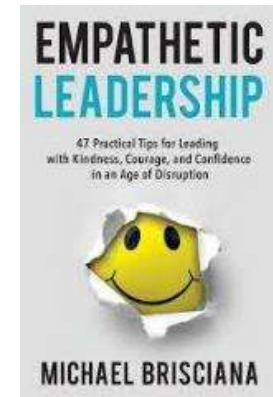
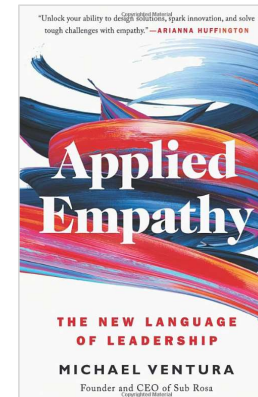
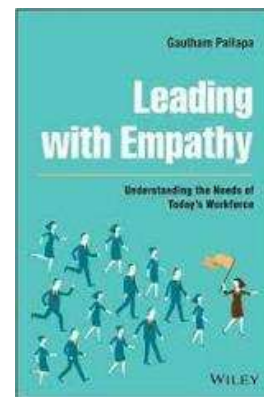
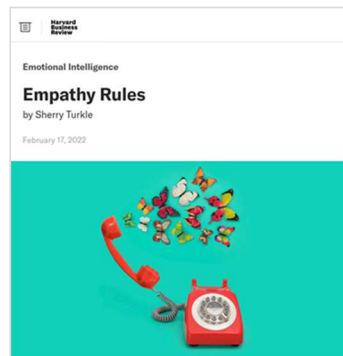
*“I get where you are coming from, I feel your pain, and I want to help.”*



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# All the rage...



# Has Empathy **Really** Become More Important to Leadership Since the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Kaiser (in press) *Consulting Psychology Journal*

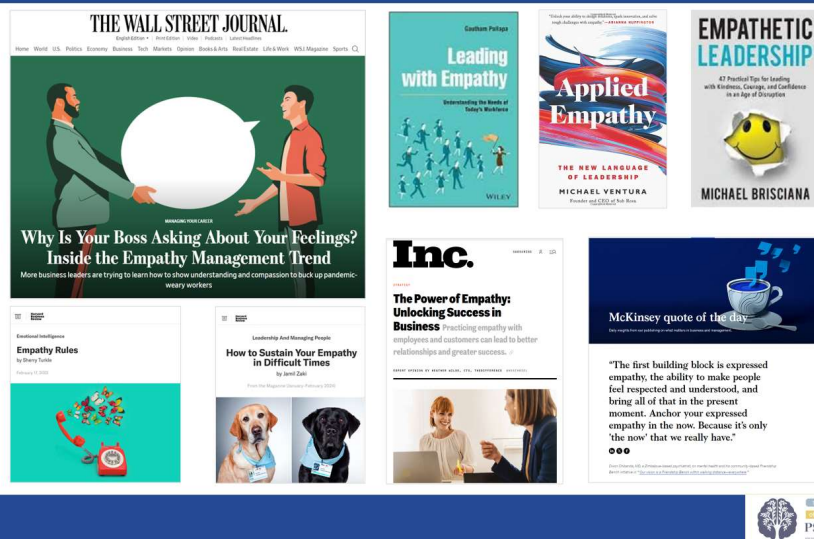


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# An Anecdote

All the rage...



“Employees are in the driver’s seat, and we must show greater empathy for their concerns if we are to survive as a firm.”

March 2022  
CEO of Investment Bank





# A Spike in Emphasis

~2x

companies prioritizing  
empathy in leader  
development  
(2021 vs 2019)

McKinsey  
& Company



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#1 mention from ~14,000 leaders:  
“What makes a great leader?”  
(in their own words; 2022)



9/10

employees believe empathic leadership  
leads to greater job satisfaction

> 50%

quit a job because their boss  
was not empathetic



# How Empathy Enhances Leadership

Empathy is “**the *sine qua non* of all social effectiveness in working life**”

Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, *Primal leadership* (2002, p. 50)

## Instrumentally

Understanding how others think and feel provides valuable knowledge for:

- influencing and motivating them
- coaching and developing them
- anticipating how they will react to decisions
- incorporating their perspectives in decisions

Gentry, Weber, & Sadri, 2016

## Interpersonally

Demonstrating empathy for employees and colleagues:

- builds trust
- strengthens commitment
- creates stronger leader-member exchange
- fosters loyalty through reciprocation

Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2017; Moore, Maxey, Waite, & Wendover, 2020

## Culturally

Leader empathy contributes to a climate of psychological safety, which enhances:

- employees' sense of belonging and inclusion
- collaboration with other individuals and teams
- willingness to speak up and express themselves
- taking risks with creativity and innovation

Edmundson, 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Van Bommel, 2021



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# How Empathy Enhances Leadership

## People-oriented



## Task-oriented



## Emergence

Kellett et al., 2002; 2006

## Effectiveness

Employees	Teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• more engaged</li><li>• less chronic stress</li><li>• fewer symptoms of burnout</li><li>• less likely to quit</li></ul> <p>Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, &amp; Bakker, 2002</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• greater positive affect</li><li>• greater wellbeing</li><li>• which, in turn, are linked to progress on group performance goals</li></ul> <p>Scott, Colquitt, Paddock, &amp; Judge, 2010</p>



# Why empathy *may have* become more important

## Historical backdrop



# Why empathy *may have gotten* more important



Gallup annual survey of Confidence in Leadership of Institutions

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

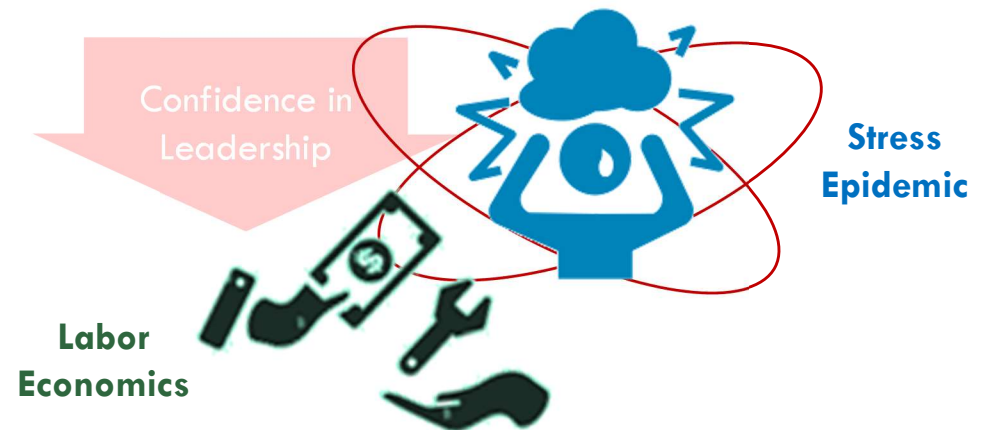


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# A perfect storm

## Historical backdrop



# A battered workforce psyche

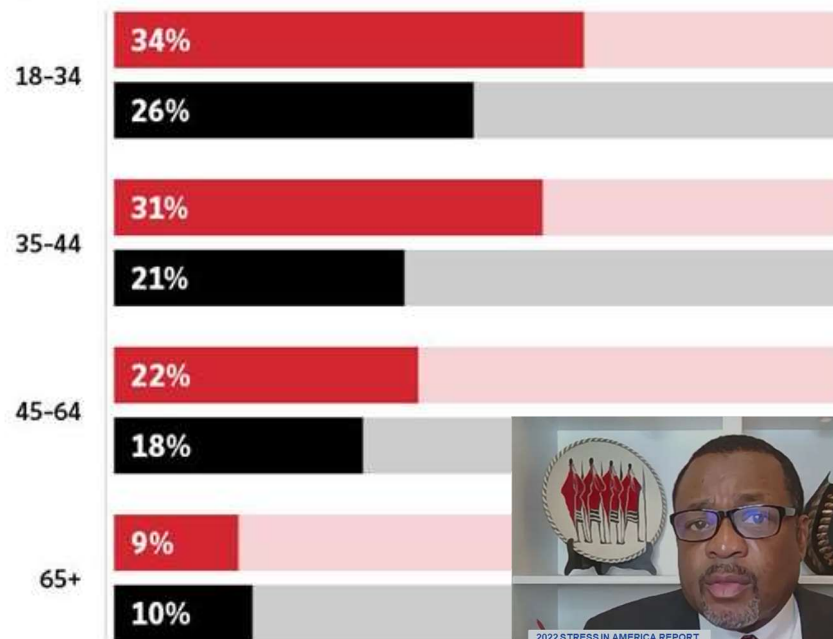
STRESS IN AMERICA™ 2022



## PRE- AND POST-PANDEMIC STRESS LEVEL COMPARISON BY AGE

% OF ADULTS WHO RATE THEIR AVERAGE STRESS BETWEEN EIGHT AND TEN\*

■ 2022 ■ 2019



2022 APA Stress in America Survey: **highest levels of stress on record**



A multitude of stressors:

- COVID-19: existential threat and massive disruptions to the normal routines of daily life, exhausted mental and physical resources (Chen, Crant, Wang, Kou, Qin, Yu, & Sun, 2021)
- Social isolation of lockdown policies & WFH/Hybrid contributed to a spike in loneliness (Lonergan-Cullum, Hooker, Levy, & Ricco, 2022)
- Police brutality and racial injustice stoked anger and resentment leading to protests and even riots
- Rising inflation presented financial pressures that disproportionately impacted workers (McKinsey, 2022)

**“These data suggest that we’re now reaching unprecedented levels of stress that will challenge our ability to cope.”**



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## 2

open jobs for every  
unemployed person  
Oct 2022



### THE GREAT RESIGNATION

**40%**  
of employees are  
considering resigning.

**70%**  
of employers are  
struggling to find talent.

**THE GREAT  
AWAKENING**  
w/ Andrew Flowers

### What is quiet quitting really?

Will quiet quitting affect you?  
Let's take a look at this latest  
workplace craze that's sweeping  
the country's water coolers.



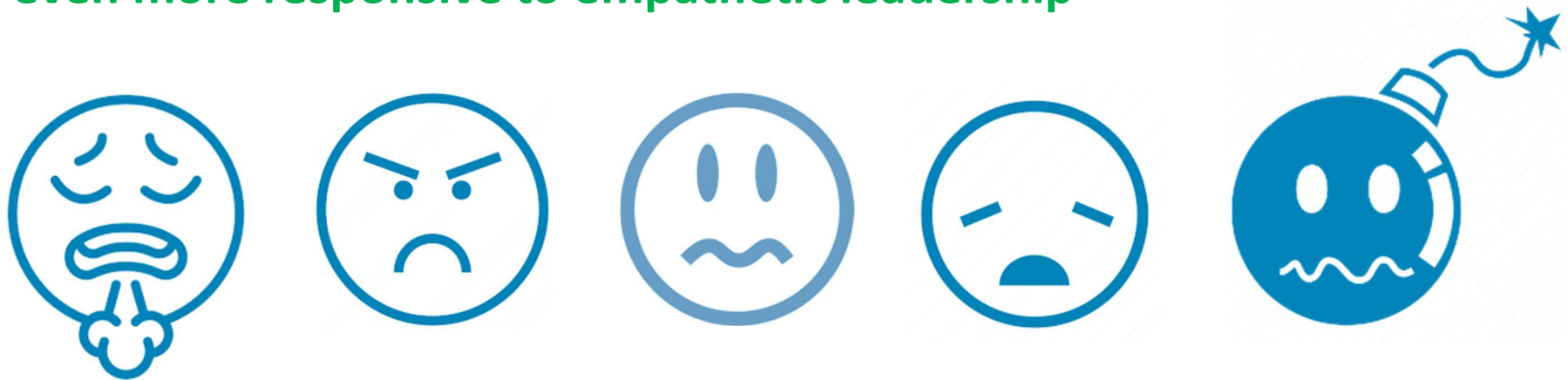
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## Cumulative effects

An exhausted, angry, worried, and lonely workforce that is stressed out, has more job options, and places less importance on work is likely to be **even more responsive to empathetic leadership**



Conversely, leaders who **do not show empathy** risk alienating employees and driving them out the door—if not over the edge!

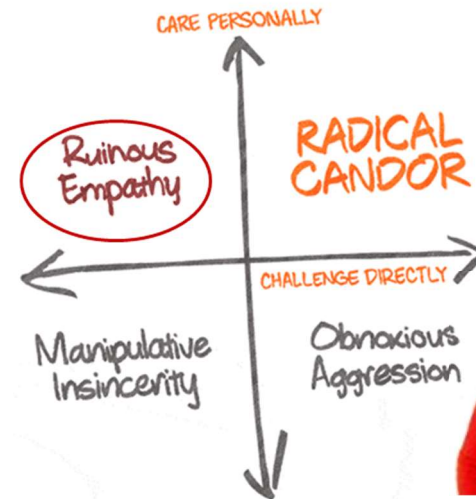
# Too Much of a Good Thing?



McCall & Lombardo, 1983

**Leaders who are very high in empathy can more easily be deceived by manipulative emotional cues**  
Zloteanu, Bull, & Richardson, 2019

**High levels of empathic concern can undermine performance in a competitive context**  
Longmire & Harrison, 2018



“Too much focus on empathy can cause some leaders to hold off on tough feedback. It’s counterproductive.”  
— Kim Scott  
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

**Leaders prone to empathic distress and internalizing the suffering of others are more likely to do so to a debilitating extent that reduces their attention to other leadership requirements and overall effectiveness**  
Simon, Rosen, Gajendran, Ozgen, & Corwin, 2022



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# Research Questions

1. Are **more leaders perceived as demonstrating more empathy** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?
2. Is the perceived demonstration of **empathy more related to effective leadership** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?
3. Are the **detrimental effects of *too much* perceived empathy less severe** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

*Is too much empathy **less costly** since the pandemic in terms of **engagement**?*

*Is too much empathy **more costly** since the pandemic in terms of **productivity**?*



# METHOD

## Research Design

Cross-sectional, between-subjects comparison of the relationship between leader empathy and outcomes across three time periods

**$n = 1,070$**

**Pre-pandemic Baseline**  
rated calendar year 2019

**$n = 902$**

**COVID Year 1**  
rated Apr 2020 – Mar 2021

**$n = 3,296$**

**COVID Year 2+**  
rated Apr 2021 – Sept 2022

**$N = 5,268$  American corporate managers**

- 69% upper level (Director, GM, & C-level)
- Roughly equivalent Age, Experience, Tenure, Proportion female, and Organizational level in each subsample

# Demographic Composition of Sample and Subsamples

	Overall Sample		2019		COVID Year 1		COVID Year 2+	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Age</b>	45.01	7.86	44.99	7.94	45.37	7.71	44.91	7.77
<b>Management Experience</b>	12.91	8.20	12.60	8.09	13.04	8.24	12.98	8.22
<b>Tenure</b>	3.88	4.50	4.05	4.72	3.99	4.49	3.80	4.65
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Gender Identity</b>								
Male	3,126	59%	623	58%	528	59%	1,975	60%
Female	2,091	40%	436	41%	361	40%	1,294	39%
Non-binary/Rather not say	51	1%	11	1%	13	1%	27	1%
<b>Organizational level</b>								
C-level	585	11%	102	10%	96	11%	387	12%
Executive/General Manager	1,328	25%	282	26%	233	26%	813	25%
Functional head/Director	1,705	32%	366	34%	298	33%	1,041	32%
Middle manager	1,205	23%	236	22%	203	23%	766	23%
Supervisor	445	8%	84	8%	72	8%	289	9%



# METHOD – independent variable



## Pilot Study Validation

- Coworker ratings of “Shows empathy...” x Personality
- N = 515 leaders



	<i>r</i>
<b>Empathy subscale</b>	<b>.23</b>
7 primary scales:	
<b>Adjustment</b>	<b>.14</b>
<b>Ambition</b>	<b>-.10</b>
<b>Sociability</b>	<b>-.07</b>
<b>Interpersonal Sensitivity</b>	<b>.16</b>
<b>Prudence</b>	<b>.09</b>
<b>Inquisitive</b>	<b>.04</b>
<b>Learning Approach</b>	<b>-.05</b>

<b>Stepwise Regression</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>
1. Empathy subscale	.18
2. Interpersonal Sensitivity	.17
3. Ambition	-.16

**R = .30**

# METHOD – dependent variables



“Please rate this individual’s **overall effectiveness** as a leader on a 10-pt scale, where 5 = adequate and 10 = outstanding.”

- Rated by **Manager, Peers, Direct Reports**

## Team Engagement

- 3 items rated 1-5 by **Direct Reports**  
(*their* morale, engagement, & cohesiveness)



## Team Productivity

- 3 items rated 1-5 by leaders’ **Managers**  
(quantity, quality, & timeliness of output)



# Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

## Overall Research Sample

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Survey Date	7-June-2021	388					
2. Leader Empathy	-.20	.40	.06**	(.90)			
3. Overall Leader Effectiveness	8.08	.65	.11**	.26**	(.86)		
4. Team Engagement	3.97	.53	.14**	.35**	.47**	(.88)	
5. Team Productivity	3.82	.65	.00	.00	.47**	.18**	(.81)

*N* = 5,268

**Notes.** \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

SD for Survey Date expressed in days. Coefficients along the diagonal are (1) rWG values for the single-item Leader Empathy and Overall Leader Effectiveness ratings and (2) internal consistency reliability estimates ( $\alpha$ ) for the Team Engagement and Team Productivity scales.

## 2019 Baseline sample

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Survey Date	3-Jul-2019	97					
2. Leader Empathy	-.24	.41	-.02	(.90)			
3. Overall Leader Effectiveness	7.95	.64	-.14**	.21**	(.86)		
4. Team Engagement	3.83	.52	.02	.25**	.45**	(.87)	
5. Team Productivity	3.82	.63	-.13**	-.10**	.41**	.16**	(.83)

*n* = 1,070

## COVID Year 1 sample

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Survey Date	29-Oct-2020	96					
2. Leader Empathy	-.21	.42	.02	(.89)			
3. Overall Leader Effectiveness	8.07	.65	.00	.28**	(.87)		
4. Team Engagement	3.99	.52	.08*	.41**	.45**	(.86)	
5. Team Productivity	3.80	.66	-.03	.02	.49**	.18**	(.80)

*n* = 902

## COVID Year 2+ sample

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Survey Date	01-Jan-2022	150					
2. Leader Empathy	-.18	.40	.03	(.90)			
3. Overall Leader Effectiveness	8.13	.64	.06**	.27**	(.86)		
4. Team Engagement	4.01	.52	.04*	.35**	.47**	(.88)	
5. Team Productivity	3.82	.65	.02	.02	.49**	.20**	(.81)

*n* = 3,296



# RESULTS – RQ1

- Are more leaders perceived as demonstrating more empathy since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

**A: Yes, slightly—but statistically significant.**

$r$  (date of survey x leader empathy rating) = **.06** ( $p < .001$ )

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Too little</i>	<i>Right Amount</i>	<i>Too much</i>
<b>2019</b>			41%	52%	7%
COVID Year 1	$p < .01$	$p < .01$	37%	55%	8% NS
COVID Year 2+	$p < .01$	$p < .01$	35%	57%	8%

5% more leaders rated “right amount” in latest sample vs 2019 baseline

# RESULTS – RQ2

2. Is the perceived demonstration of **empathy more related to effective leadership** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

**A: Sort of. In some ways. It's complicated!**

Analyses required a complex statistical test of (1) curvilinear relationships between leader empathy and the outcomes that (2) changed over time.

*Curvilinear hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis:*

For each of 3 outcome dependent variables:

Step 1: enter Leader Empathy, Leader Empathy<sup>2</sup>, & Survey Date

Step 2: add interaction terms (Empathy x Survey date, Empathy<sup>2</sup> x Survey Date, Empathy x Survey date<sup>2</sup>, Empathy<sup>3</sup>, & Survey Date x Empathy<sup>3</sup>)

# Curvilinear hierarchical moderated multiple regression results

	Overall Effectiveness					Team Engagement					Team Productivity				
	B	SE	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	B	SE	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	B	SE	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1 Constant	8.17	.009		860.93	.000	4.07	.008		541.20	.000	3.82	.010		380.88	.000
Leader Empathy	.14	.034	.086	4.11	.000	.25	.027	.191	9.36	.000	-.11	.036	-.069	-3.12	.002
Leader Empathy <sup>2</sup>	-.31	.029	-.219	-10.46	.000	-.22	.023	-.190	-9.32	.000	-.12	.031	-.084	-3.83	.000
Z Survey Date	.06	.008	.093	7.07	.000	.06	.007	.114	8.93	.000	.00	.009	.004	.27	.785
<i>R</i>	.31	<i>F</i> (3, 5264) = 187.41, <i>p</i> < .001				.38	<i>F</i> (3, 5264) = 301.62, <i>p</i> < .001				.05	<i>F</i> (3, 5264) = 4.91, <i>p</i> < .01			
Step 2 Constant	8.19	.010		809.77	.000	4.10	.008		515.20	.000	3.83	.011		357.47	.000
Leader Empathy	.12	.034	.075	3.59	.000	.23	.027	.175	8.63	.000	-.12	.036	-.072	-3.27	.001
Leader Empathy <sup>2</sup>	-.65	.058	-.468	-11.32	.000	-.65	.045	-.571	-14.29	.000	-.32	.061	-.226	-5.17	.000
Z Survey Date	.07	.010	.112	7.10	.000	.08	.008	.144	9.46	.000	.02	.011	.034	2.04	.042
Z Survey Date x Empathy	.10	.032	.073	3.12	.002	.10	.026	.088	3.94	.000	.03	.034	.019	.80	.427
Z Survey Date x Empathy <sup>2</sup>	.02	.052	.012	.28	.778	.00	.041	-.004	-.09	.926	-.11	.055	-.083	-1.92	.045
Empathy <sup>3</sup>	-.22	.031	-.255	-6.94	.000	-.27	.024	-.390	-10.97	.000	-.12	.033	-.143	-3.70	.000
Z Survey Date x Empathy <sup>3</sup>	-.02	.029	-.029	-.84	.400	-.03	.023	-.036	-1.09	.277	-.04	.030	-.049	-1.35	.177
<i>R</i>	.33	<i>F</i> (7, 5260) = 89.25, <i>p</i> < .001				.41	<i>F</i> (7, 5260) = 152.24, <i>p</i> < .001				.09	<i>F</i> (7, 5260) = 5.87, <i>p</i> < .001			
$\Delta R$	.02	<i>F</i> (4, 5263) = 14.21, <i>p</i> < .001				.03	<i>F</i> (4, 5263) = 34.45, <i>p</i> < .001				.04	<i>F</i> (4, 5263) = 6.58, <i>p</i> < .001			

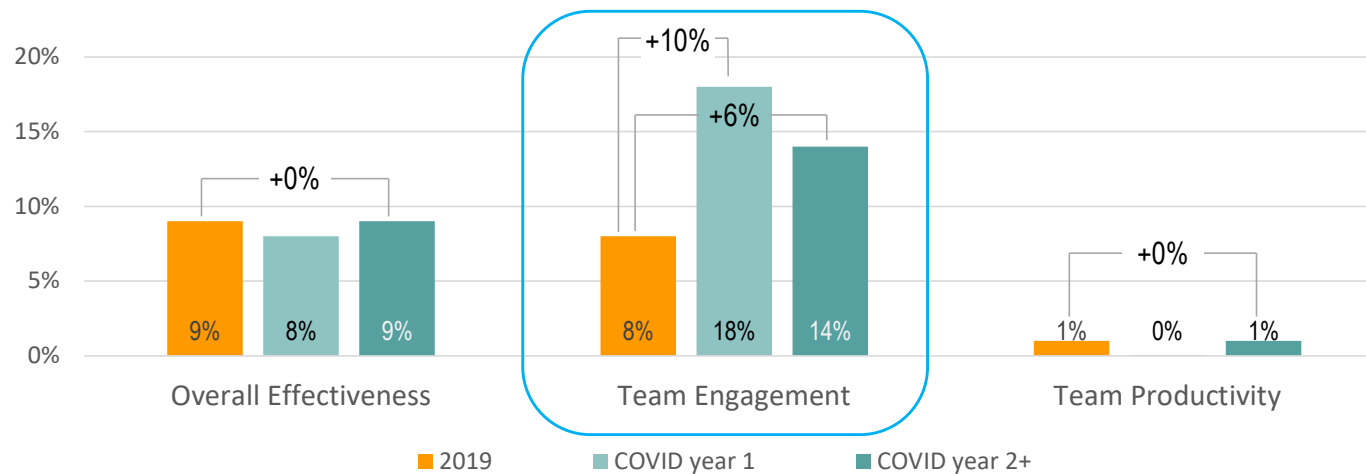
# Statistical effects

## *Rs* from Separate Curvilinear Regressions with Leader Empathy as Predictor

	2019	COVID year 1	COVID year 2+
Overall Effectiveness	.30	.29	.30
Team Engagement	.29	.43	.37
Team Productivity	.10	.02	.08

All 3 effect sizes  
sig different  
( $p < .001$ )

## Variance accounted for ( $R^2$ )



## RESULTS – RQ2

2. Is the perceived demonstration of **empathy more related to effective leadership** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

**A: Sort of. In some ways. It's complicated!**

Effect in **predicting Team Engagement** was significantly different across all 3 samples:

- Strongest effect in COVID year 1
- Slightly weaker effect in COVID year 2+
- **Weakest effect in 2019 baseline**

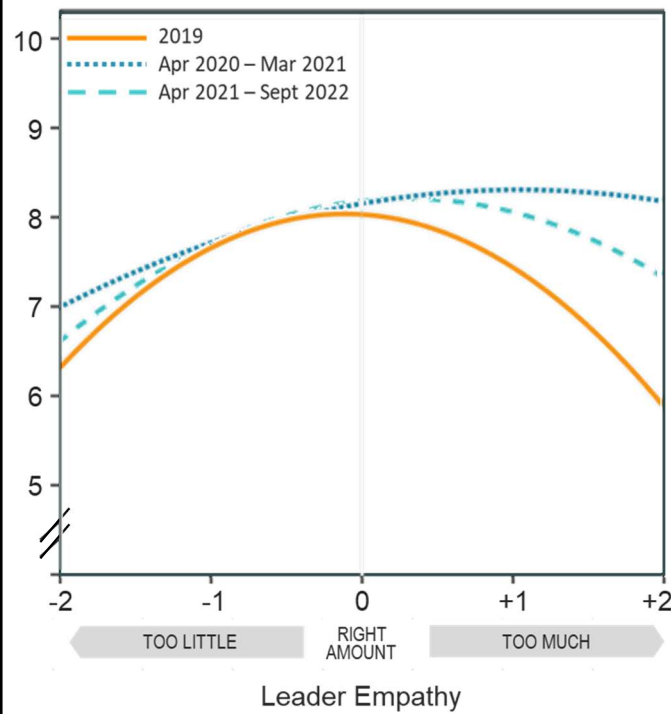
**Empathy had its strongest effect on engagement during that fateful year, 2020.**

No differences in effect sizes T3 vs T1 for Leader Effectiveness or Productivity.

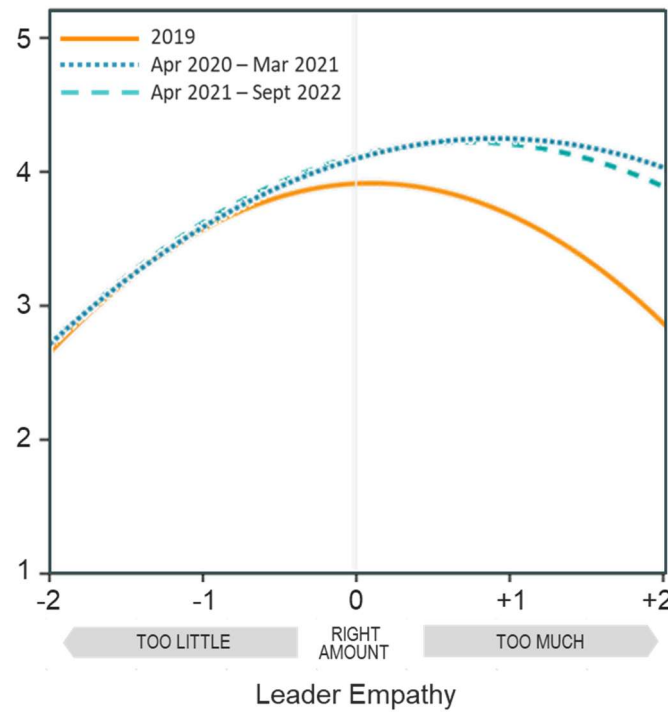
**More than different effect sizes, the forms of these relationships were different over time.**

# Different functional forms over time

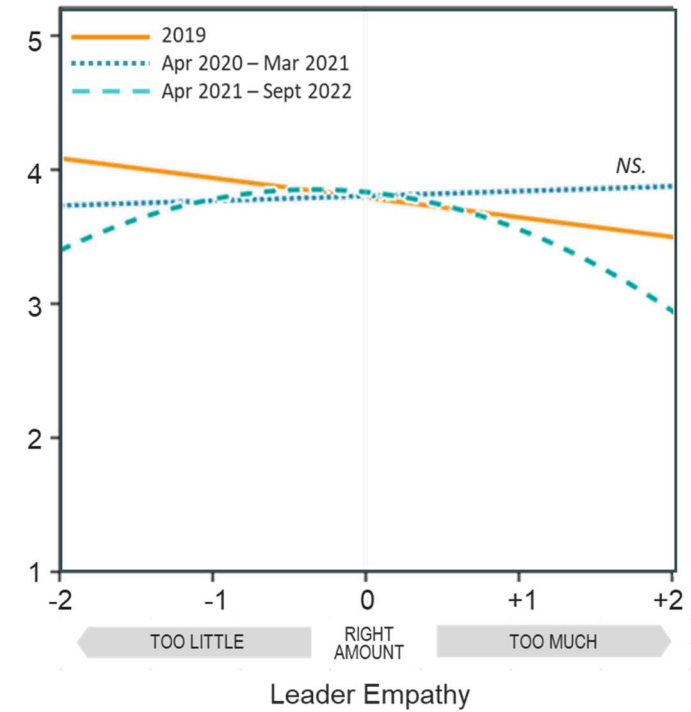
Overall Leader Effectiveness



Team Engagement

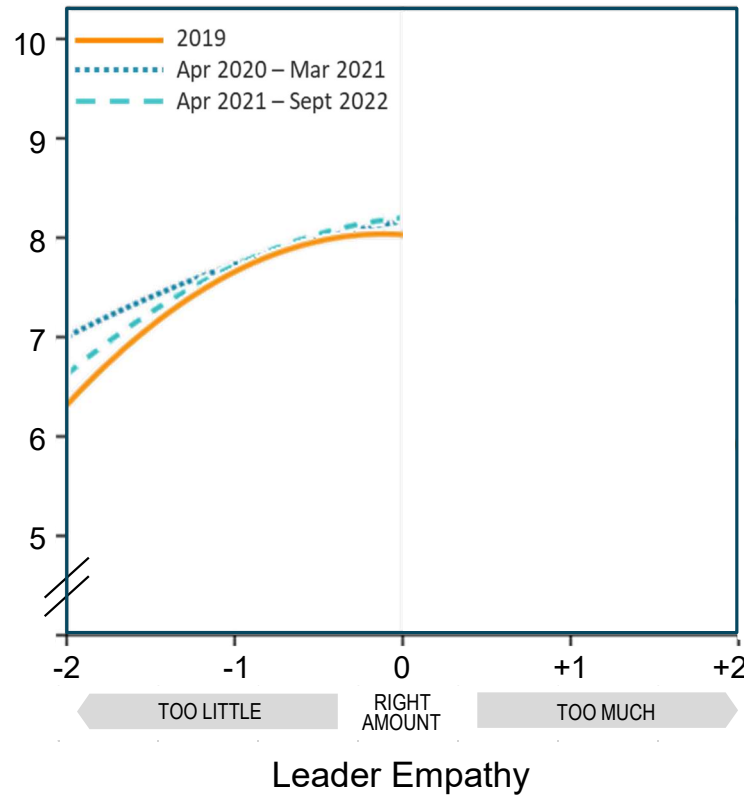


Team Productivity



# Cost of “too little” empathy

Overall Leader Effectiveness

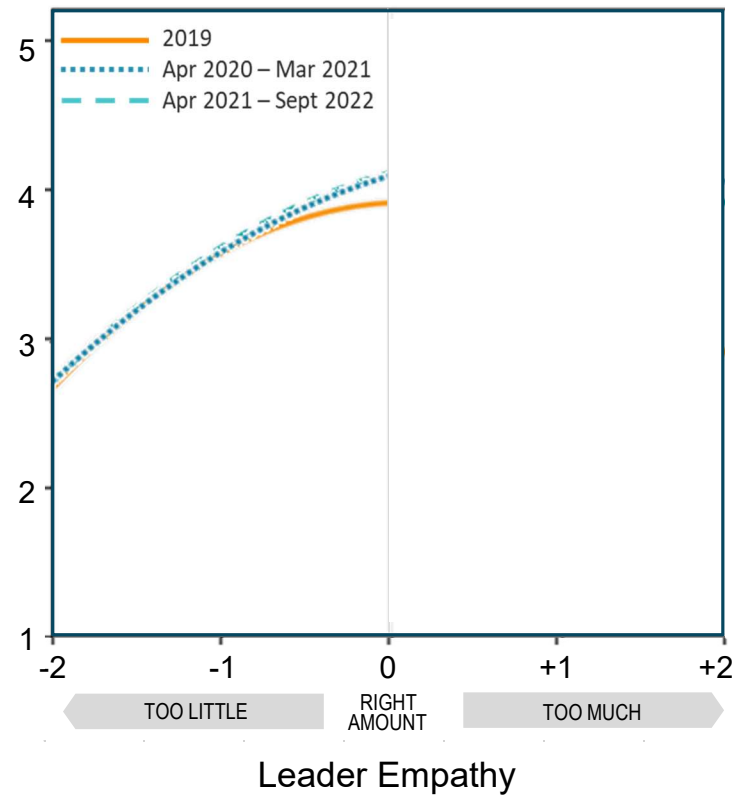


No Sig Diff slopes in  
“too little” range

No support for expected  
increasingly toxic effect  
for “too little” empathy  
after onset of COVID

## Cost of “too little” empathy

### Team Engagement



No Sig Diff slopes in  
“too little” range

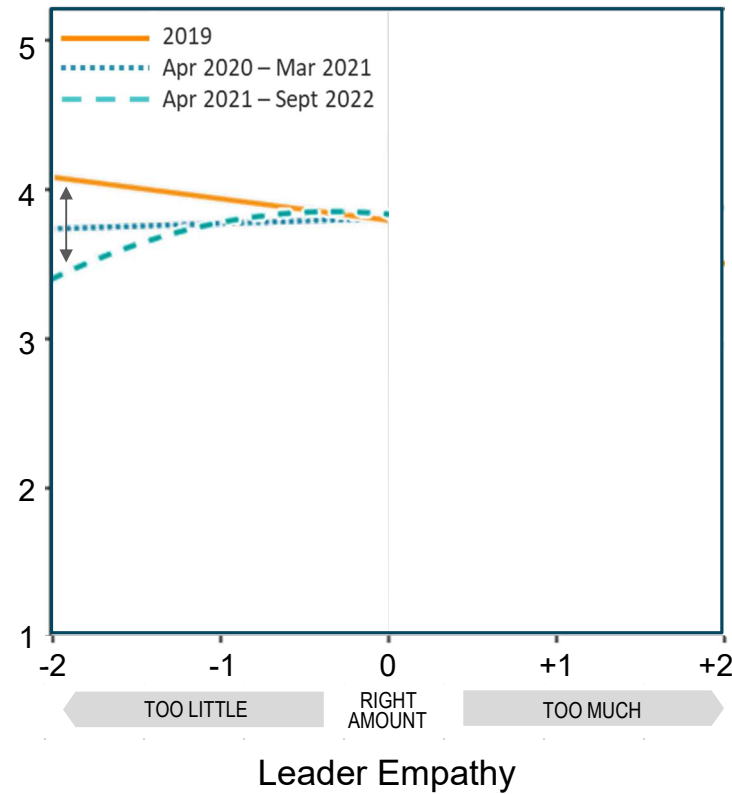
No support for expected  
increasingly toxic effect  
for “too little” empathy  
after onset of COVID





## Cost of “too little” empathy

### Team Productivity



Sig Diff slopes for  
2019 vs COVID Year 2+

Benefit to less leader empathy  
for productivity pre-pandemic

Cost to less leader empathy for  
productivity in COVID Year 2+



## RESULTS – RQ2

2. Is the perceived demonstration of **empathy more related to effective leadership** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

**A: Sort of. In some ways. It's complicated!**

The cost of “too little” empathy **did not increase** in terms of:

- Overall leader effectiveness
- Engagement

But the **cost did increase for productivity.**

- Pre-pandemic, increasingly less Leader Empathy boosted Team Productivity
- During COVID Year 2+, increasingly less Leader Empathy undermined Team Productivity

## RESULTS – RQ3

3. Are the **detrimental effects of *too much* perceived empathy** less severe since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

*Is too much empathy **less costly** since the pandemic in terms of **engagement**?*

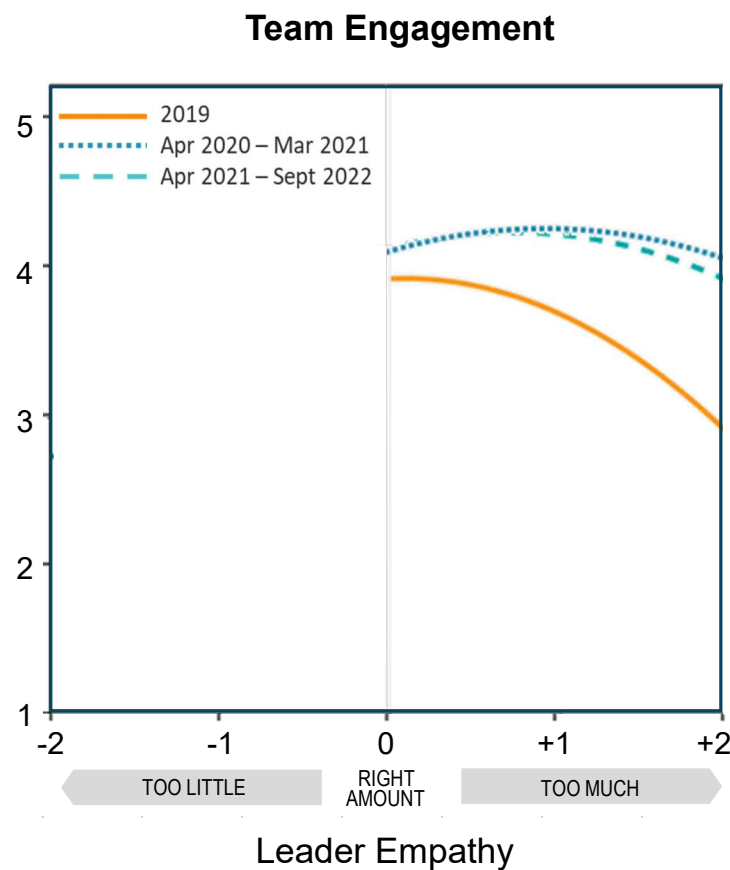
**A: Yes!**

*Is too much empathy **more costly** since the pandemic in terms of **productivity**?*

**A: Yes!**



# Cost of “too much” empathy

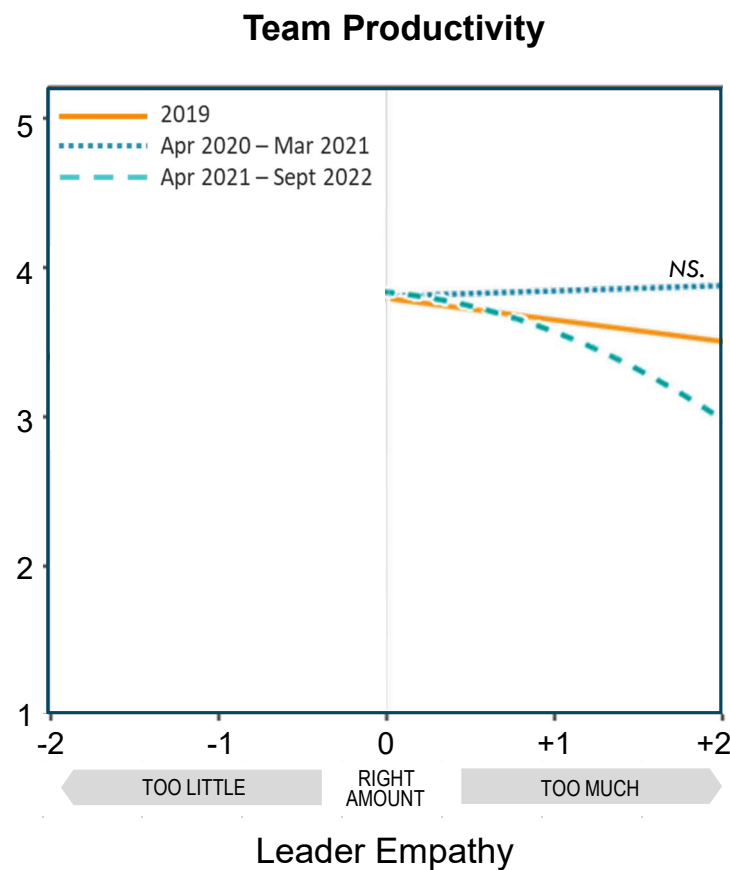


Sig Diff slopes in  
“too much” range for  
2019 vs 2 later samples

- Biggest cost pre-pandemic
- Negligible cost in COVID Year 1 and Year 2+



# Cost of “too much” empathy



Sig Diffs for all 3 slopes in the “too much” range

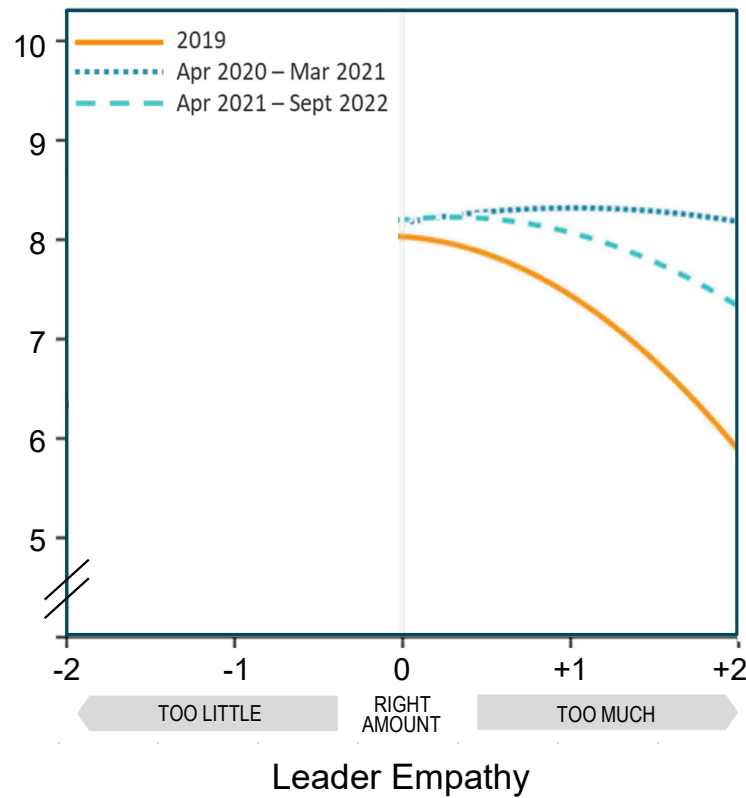
- Some cost pre-pandemic
- No cost in COVID Year 1
- Greatest cost in COVID Year 2+



# Cost of “too much” empathy

No prediction for effect on Overall Effectiveness

## Overall Leader Effectiveness

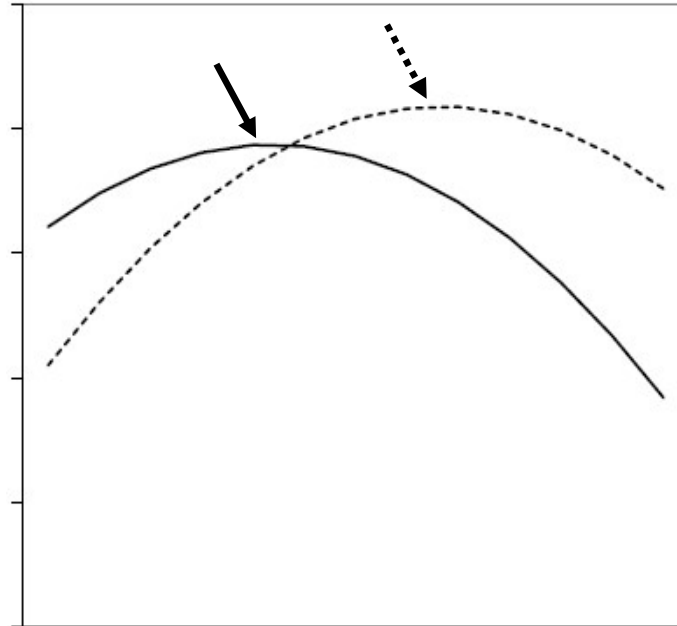


Sig Diffs for all 3 slopes in the “too much” range

- Biggest cost pre-pandemic
- Virtually no cost in COVID Year 1
- Cost trending back toward 2019 baseline in COVID Year 2+

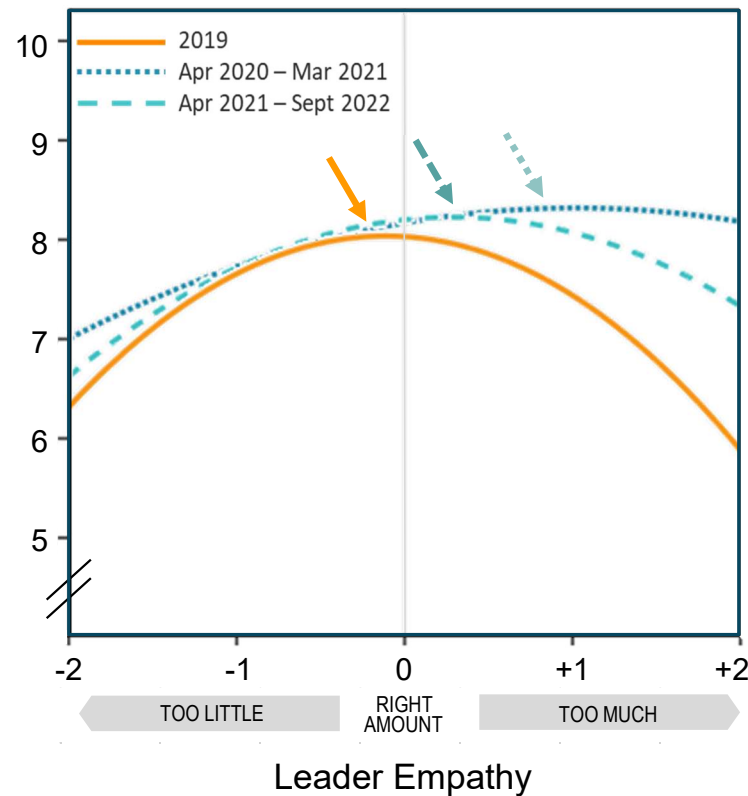
# RESULTS

What about the optimal level of leader empathy?



# Optimal level of empathy

## Overall Leader Effectiveness



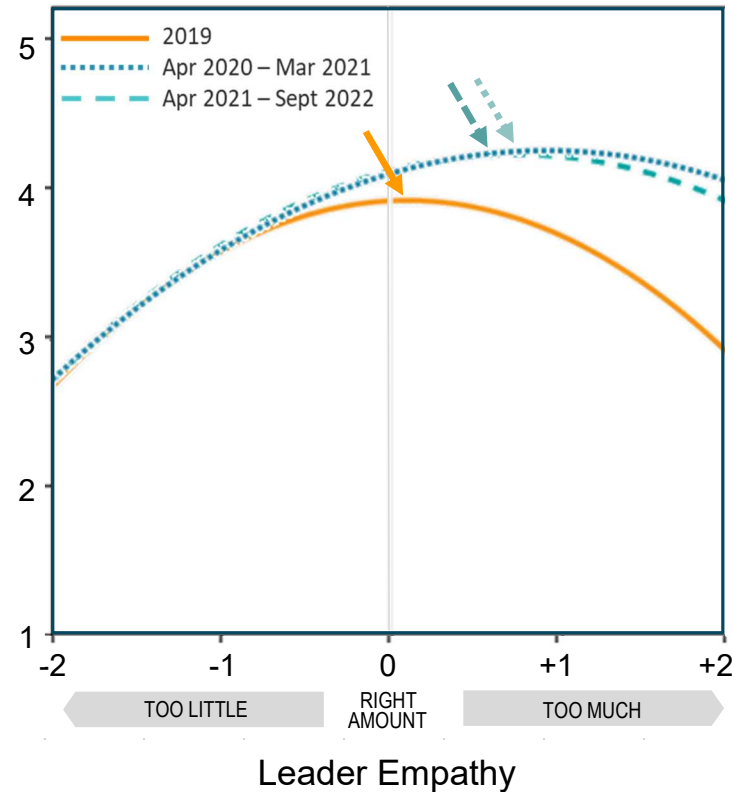
All 3 Sig Diff inflection points  
(optimal level of Empathy)

- *Leaning “too little” empathy associated with highest effectiveness pre-pandemic*
- “Too much” empathy associated with greater effectiveness in COVID Year 1
- Trending back toward 2019 baseline in COVID year 2+



# Optimal level of empathy

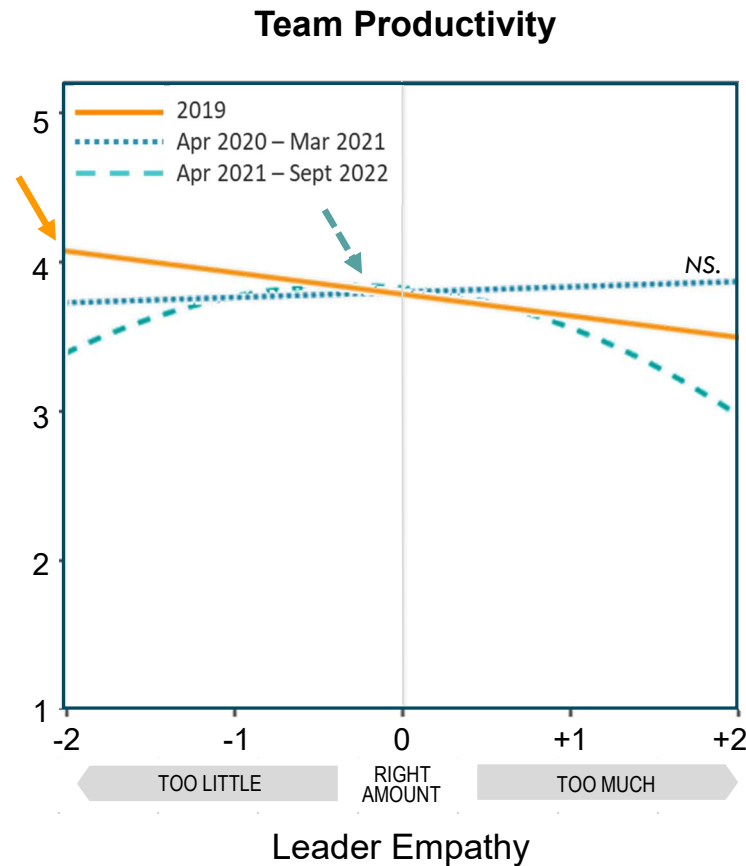
## Team Engagement



Sig Diff inflection points for later 2 samples vs 2019 (optimal level of Empathy)

- “Right amount” of empathy associated with highest engagement pre-pandemic
- “Too much” empathy associated with highest engagement since the COVID outbreak—and persisted through Year 2+

# Optimal level of empathy

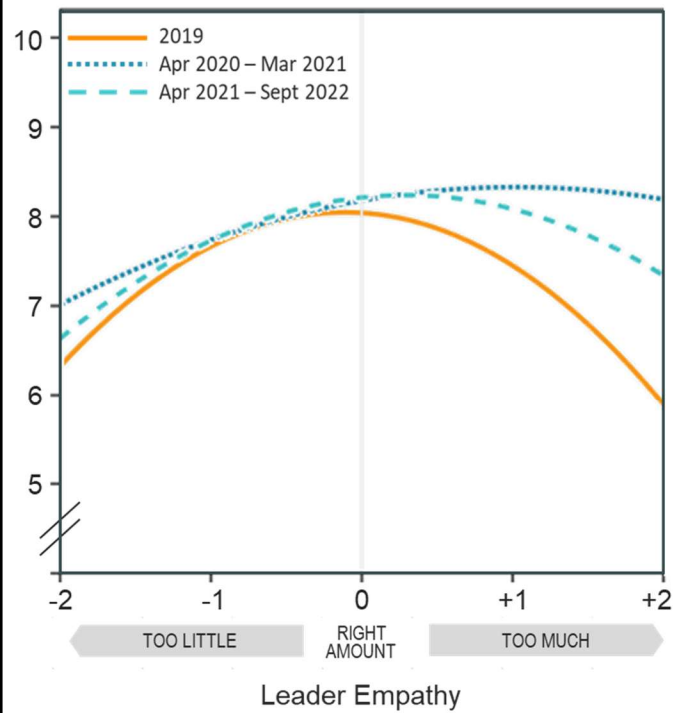


Sig Diff inflection points  
(optimal level of Empathy)

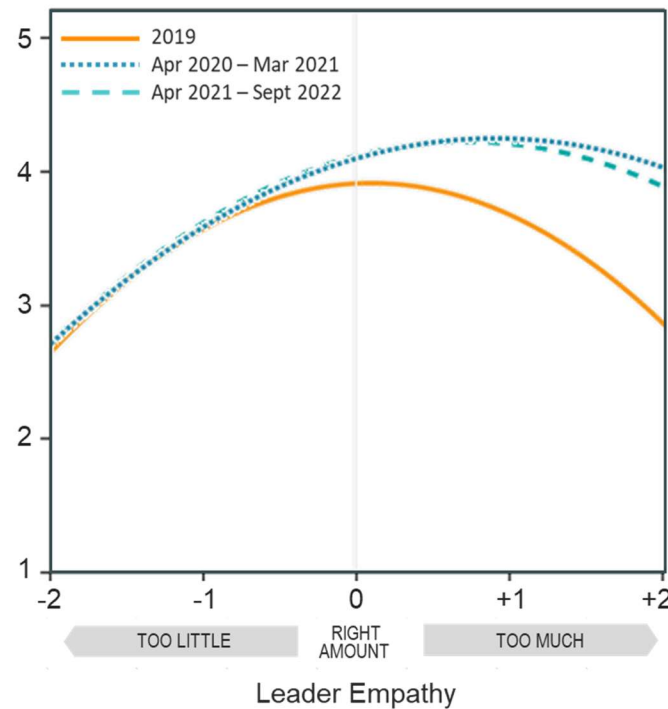
- Negative relationship between empathy and productivity pre-pandemic; less empathy = more productivity
- No relationship in COVID Year 1
- *Leaning* “too little” empathy associated with highest productivity in COVID Year 2+

# Different functional forms over time

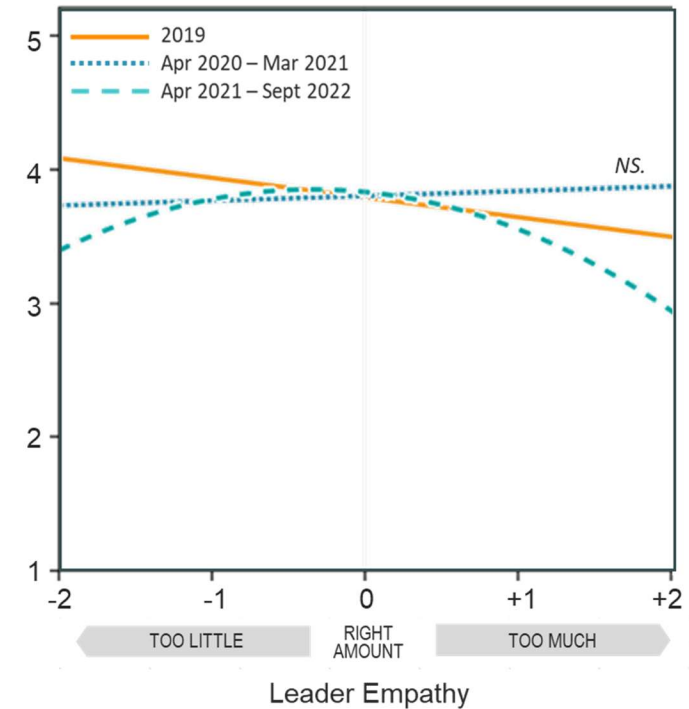
Overall Leader Effectiveness



Team Engagement



Team Productivity



# Summary of Results

1. Are **more leaders perceived as demonstrating more empathy** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before it?

**A: Yes, slightly. +5% more leaders rated “right amount” in latest sample vs 2019 baseline.**

2. Is the perceived demonstration of **empathy more related to effective leadership** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before?

**A: Only for engagement. And there was limited evidence of an increasingly toxic effect for “too little” empathy (effect was only in the case of productivity).**

3. Are the **detrimental effects of *too much* perceived empathy less severe** since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before?

*Is too much empathy less costly since the pandemic in terms of engagement?*

**A: Yes, barely any cost to “too much” empathy re: engagement since the onset of COVID.**

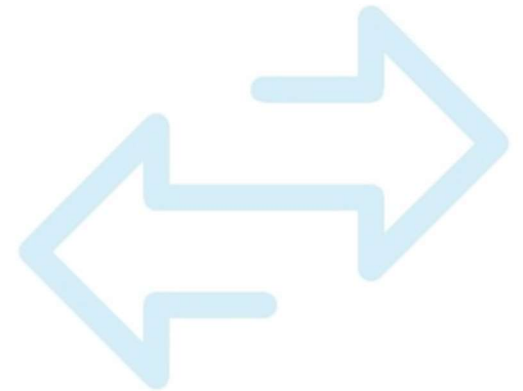
*Is too much empathy more costly since the pandemic in terms of productivity?*

**A: Yes, “too much” empathy degraded productivity even more in COVID Year 2 vs 2019.**



# What changed since “the before times”?

1. DRs rated slightly **more leaders as demonstrating greater empathy** (+6%).
2. Leader empathy became even more related to **engagement**.
  - But not because less empathy has gotten more toxic.
  - Rather, because excessive empathy got “better” for engagement.
  - Workforce 2020-2022 seemed to *really respond* to leader empathy—even when they rated it as “too much”!
3. A lack of empathy drove **productivity** higher pre-pandemic. Since the first year of COVID, it has undermined productivity. (At least through Oct 2022.)
4. **Excessive empathy** is relatively rare (~8%), but has become even more detrimental to productivity and, to some extent, beneficial for engagement (especially during times of peak stress).



## Leader empathy hangs in the balance



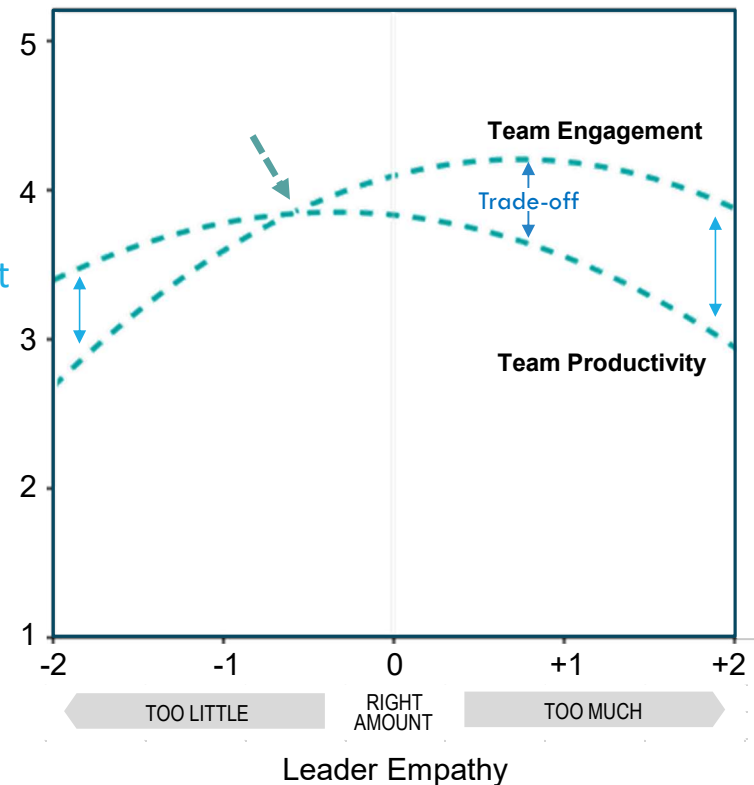
Perhaps what has **changed most** since  
COVID-19 is greater tension for  
empathetic leaders in striking a balance



# Leader empathy hangs in the balance

COVID Year 2+  
(Apr 2021 – Sep 2022)  
Sample

- Less empathy reduces engagement more than productivity
- But excessive empathy reduces productivity more than engagement
- **A little “too little” empathy optimizes both outcomes**



As leaders demonstrate more empathy than “optimal,” they may:

- Benefit from higher engagement
- But at an increasing cost in lower productivity



# Study Limitations

1. Cross-sectional, within-subjects design precludes causal inferences
2. Convenience sample, archival data, commercial instrument
3. American sample
4. Single-item measure of perceived behavioral empathy  
Forget what you learned in grad school; single-item measures *can* be reliable and valid!  
(Foster, Stone, Harms, & Jawahar, 2022; Matthews, Pineault, & Hong, 2022;  
Wood, Nye, & Saucier, 2010)  
**This study probably *under-estimates* Leader Empathy x Outcomes relationship**
5. What's happened since Sept 2022?









## From Science to Practice: Individual, Leadership, & Organizational Approaches to Build Empathy Cultures



# Inoculating organizations against a toxic culture



# Interventions at multiple levels



# Individual-level Approaches – to enhance empathy



1. Practice **compassion-based** mindfulness meditation (Valk et al., 2017).
2. **Reflect on decisions** involving others each day and those you might exclude.
3. Make a commitment to **interact** with someone you perceive as different (step outside your comfort zone).
4. Develop **empathy skills**

# Individual-level Approaches – to enhance empathy

## Empathy Skills

### 1. Active listening

Not just for facts, but also underlying feelings

### 2. Perspective taking

And mirroring back to confirm understanding

### 3. Showing compassion

Relating to others with our common humanity

### 4. Toggling mindsets

From task-focused analytical thinking to relationship-focused emotional thinking  
(Boyatzis & Jack, 2018)



# Individual-level Approaches – to manage “too much” empathy



## Undesirable Effects of “Excessive Empathy”





## Compassion fatigue in service professionals

The effect size for the relationship between **Empathic Concern** with *Depersonalization* was significant [ $-0.252, p < 0.01$ ]

Effect size links between **Perspective-Taking** and *Depersonalization* [ $-0.27, p < 0.01$ ] and *Personal Accomplishment* [ $0.30, p < 0.01$ ] were significant



Delgado et al., (2023) What is the link between different components of empathy and burnout in healthcare professionals? A systematic review and meta-analysis, *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 16, 447-463. DOI: 10.2147/PRBM.S384247





**Perspective-taking** had a **positive indirect** effect on coworker well-being via received coworker support, but had a **negative indirect** effect on the focal **employee's well-being** via self-regulatory resource depletion

Fasbender, et al., (2023). Good for you, bad for me? The daily dynamics of perspective taking and well-being in coworker dyads. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000367>

## Managing empathy burnout

### 1. Physician, heal thyself

- Acknowledge distress of carrying others' pain
- Self-care
- Ask for Help

### 2. Learn to tune your caring

- Different “frequencies of caring”
- Keep empathic concern high, distress low

### 3. Remember that empathy is a skill

- Emotional balance (caring well  $\neq$  caring more)
- Intentional shift: empathic distress  $\rightarrow$  concern
- “Compassion meditation”

Harvard  
Business  
Review



Magazine  
Article



## How to Sustain Your Empathy in Difficult Times

Managers are expected to provide employees with more emotional support than ever—and many are burning out. There's a better way.  
by Jamil Zaki



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## Tactics for managing the debilitating effects of excessive empathy



1. Dealing with conflict, giving constructive feedback, & addressing performance problems
  - Prepare by rehearsing, anticipating alternative reactions, & formulating alternative responses
  - Visualize the encounter, practice with another person
2. Strategic timing
  - Schedule for time of day when energy is good
  - Block time afterwards for recovery rituals
3. Compartmentalizing
  - Manage interpersonal boundaries
  - Mentally toggle from relationship to task focus



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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000164>

## EMPATHY ENHANCING ANTIDOTES FOR INTERPERSONALLY TOXIC LEADERS

Kenneth Nowack  
*Envisia Learning, Inc., Santa  
Monica, California*

Paul Zak  
*Claremont Graduate University*

There is increasing evidence that toxic interpersonal leadership practices and behavior cause serious problems for employees, organizations, and society (Kraskikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The empathy–altruism hypothesis (e.g., Batson & Oleson, 1991) suggests that an empathic response is a necessary component in human prosocial behaviors with important implications for both leaders and organizations today. Many studies support a link between empathy (empathetic distress, empathic concern, and perspective-taking) and prosocial engagement (Zak, 2018), as well as a significant association between lack of perceived caring and warmth of leaders and adverse emotional, behavioral, and health outcomes in employees (Nowack, 2016). In this article, we explore the value of empathy as a set of behaviors to mitigate the association between toxic interpersonal leadership practices and negative individual and organizational outcomes (e.g., retention intentions, disengagement, psychological well-being). In our summary, we suggest specific evidence-based interventions for practitioners and organizations to promote empathy-enhancing antidotes to such toxic leadership practices.

### *What's It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology*

Leaders who demonstrate caring and empathy contribute to positive outcomes on employee engagement, performance, and retention. Specific individual and organizational interventions are suggested for enhancing empathetic concern, perspective-taking, and caring in leaders at all levels.

**Keywords:** empathy, leadership, trust, justice, performance

# Leadership Strategies to Enhance Empathy Cultures



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SCP 2020 Annual Conference | February 2-4, 2020 | World Gateway, Austin, TX

# Leadership Practices that Build Empathy Cultures

Our trust research has identified **8 key leadership practices** that enhance a culture of psychological safety, interpersonal trust, & empathy

Nowack, K. and Zak, P. (2017). Brain trust. *Talent Economy Magazine*, 2, 28-33.

Zak, P. J. (2017). *Trust factor: The science of creating high-performance companies*. AMACOM.



## Ovation

Acknowledges and gives prompt recognition and praise to individuals for their efforts, progress and accomplishments.



## eXpectation

Communicates clear and challenging goals, provides ongoing feedback against agreed expectations and measure success.



## Yield

Encourages and trusts individual decision making and independence, supports different approaches, treats mistakes as learning opportunities and provides support when required.



## Transfer

Takes responsibility for utilising the skills and talent within the team, encourages autonomy and self-management to create empowered teams.



## Openness

Role models transparency, shares thinking, knowledge and information and willingly seeks and values input from others.



## Caring

Builds caring and collaborative relationships, shows consideration of others to foster teamwork and support.



## Invest

Invests time in talent development, identifying strengths and opportunities to help individuals grow. Supports ongoing learning and development.



## Natural

Is natural and genuine, models integrity and honesty and is open around their vulnerabilities and mistakes and willing to ask for help.



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# Leadership Practices that Build Empathy Cultures



1. Acknowledge current **work/life balance** and physical well-being challenges.
2. Psychologically **detach and recover** from work—it directly influences your employee's ability to also do so (Sonnentag & Schiffer, 2019).





## Leadership Practices that Build Empathy Cultures

3. Check **your own biases** and advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion within your team (e.g., encourage all voices, celebrate people).
4. **Reframe mistakes** and support a culture of experimentation, success, and failure.
5. Coach and **reinforce team members to collaborate** and not compete with each other.



## How does your behavior impact psychological safety?

**Impression Management:** Do team members become open or guarded with your presence?

**Involvement Orientation:** Do team members truly believe you listen to their input, suggestions and ideas?

**Conflict Orientation:** Do team members see you encouraging and supporting different points of view?

**Candor:** Are team members providing you honest feedback or not (e.g., “that was a great meeting!”)

**Solicitation of Ideas:** Do team members openly share their ideas and suggestions or is it met with silence?

**Mistakes/Errors:** Do team members truly believe you look at mistakes and errors as ways to improve and not repeat them again or afraid of being punished?

**Feedback:** Do team members see your style as enhancing or hindering feedback shared in the team?

**Respect:** Do team members see you as accepting and treating every team member equally or “playing favorites?”



# Organizational-Level Approaches to Building Empathy Cultures



Livingstone et al., (2023). You get us, so you like us: Feeling understood by an outgroup predicts more positive intergroup relations via perceived positive regard. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000434>

Intergroup felt understanding is associated with **positive intergroup outcomes**

- Reflecting back outgroup members' **expressions of suffering and victimhood** communicates recognition of those feelings
- Reflecting expressed **concerns and needs** helps to satisfy the emotional needs of victims
- **Intergroup apologies** fosters the sense of being understood

## Organizational-Level Approaches to Building Empathy Cultures

1. Provide **feedback to leaders** on practices that can contribute to a high trust team.
2. Encourage and reinforce an **appreciation culture** that impacts well-being and engagement (Leiter et al., 2016; Stocker et al., 2019).
3. Articulate company **values around empathy and tolerance** for differences in the initial interview/selection processes (Nook, 2016).



# Organizational-Level Approaches to Building Empathy Cultures

Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research  
2017, Vol. 69, No. 2, 66–79

© 2017 American Psychological Association  
1065-9293/17/\$12.00 http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cp0000077

## SLEEP, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, AND INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS: NATURAL BEDFELLOWS

Kenneth Nowack  
*Envisia Learning, Santa Monica, California*

According to the National Sleep Foundation's Sleep in America Poll, U.S. adults sleep between 6.7 to 7.3 hr every night, which has decreased by approximately 2 hr per night since the 19th century (National Sleep Foundation, 2016). Inconsistent or insufficient sleep can be costly for business, impacting leadership decision making/judgment, interpersonal relations, absenteeism, presenteeism, safety, productivity, and health (Gaultney & Collins-McNeil, 2009; Mills et al., 2007; Rosekind et al., 2010). Daytime sleepiness can be dangerous, and inadequate sleep is a known health hazard resulting in fatigue that can impair both performance and social functioning. In light of existing research on the effects of insufficient sleep on work performance, this study investigated the relationship between self-reported sleep quality and quantity (Stress Profile) of leaders with a concurrent evaluation of relationship skills by their manager and others (direct reports and peers) on a measure of emotional and social competence. Regression analyses indicated that leaders who reported poor quality and quantity of sleep were rated significantly lower on interpersonal effectiveness after controlling for gender and perceived work/life stress by their direct reports and peers but not by their manager.

**Keywords:** sleep, emotional intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness, 360-degree feedback, leadership effectiveness

In today's global and competitive economy, leaders are increasingly driven to higher levels of productivity to enhance organizational effectiveness. Under challenging "always on" work demands, coupled with long and irregular work hours and travel, leaders often compensate by sacrificing sleep, which can directly lead to fatigue and impaired emotional regulation (Kao, Spitzmueller, Cigularov, & Wu, 2016). This article will start with a brief review of research of insufficient sleep and its effects on health, performance, and leadership behavior. That will be followed by a report on a study of its connection to emotional and social competence in leaders. Implications for organizations and those who consult with them will briefly be discussed.

### Sleep, Health, and Performance

Lack of sleep contributes to impaired self-regulatory behaviors influencing the ability to which leaders can concentrate on task execution and regulate emotions and social behavior (Baumeister &

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kenneth Nowack, Envisia Learning, 2208 6th Street, Santa Monica, CA 90405. E-mail: ken@envisialearning.com

4. Screen, select and promote for **high civility** and emotional/social competence (Porath, 2016).
5. Encourage **healthy lifestyle practices** in employees to minimize incivility:
  - Lack of sleep, particularly, within leaders is associated with low emotional intelligence (Nowack, 2017)
  - Physical Activity diminishes the impact of toxic leaders (Watkins & Umphress, 2020)



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## Organizational-Level Approaches to Building Empathy Cultures

6. Enhance diversity of teams and groups working together as interpersonal contact and interactions **decrease** prejudice and increase out-group positivity (Van Assche, 2023).
7. Provide employee ***training/coaching*** on DE&I, conflict, communication, feedback & listening skills to enhance understanding and tolerance for differences.



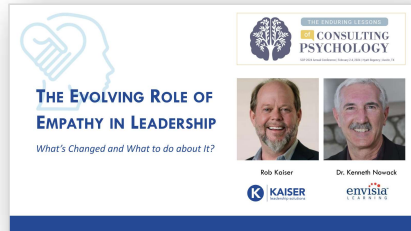


# What strategies, tactics, and techniques do you use **to Develop Empathy among Leaders?**





## Download slides:



1. Go to:  
[www.KaiserLeadership.com](http://www.KaiserLeadership.com)
2. Select: **Big Ideas**
3. Select: **Presentations**

A screenshot of the KaiserLeadership.com website. The browser address bar shows "kaiserleadership.com" with a blue arrow labeled "1" pointing to it. The website has a navigation bar with "KAISER" logo and links for "Assessment Tools", "Coaching &amp; Consulting", "Big Ideas", and "About Us". A blue arrow labeled "2" points to the "Big Ideas" link. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column is titled "TOPICS" and lists "Latest", "Leadership", "Versatility", "Personality", "Teams", "Assessment", "Executive Selection", "Women &amp; Leadership", and "Strengths Overused". A blue arrow labeled "3" points to the "Presentations" link under the "SOURCES" column. The right column is titled "FEATURED" and lists three articles: "New Leader Transition Strategies", "Post-pandemic Leadership: Versatility and Empathy", and "Leadership Versatility on the Hogan Podcast Live". Each article has a "READ MORE" link. At the bottom, there is a large image of three people (two men and one woman) looking at a tablet, with the text "Let's get it right" and a paragraph about leadership.