

## INSIGHTS

# Ten Tips for Developing Leadership Empathy

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*Empathy* is the ability to understand and share the feelings, concerns and motivations of others. Empathy creates *trust* between leaders and subordinates.

I say trust *between* leaders and subordinates because trust is a “two-way street.” Subordinates will not trust a leader who does not trust them. A leader will not trust subordinates who do not trust the leader. For empathy to be effective at creating trust, empathy itself must also be a two-way street. That is why effective leaders have empathy for subordinates—and why effective leaders work to develop in their subordinates empathy for the leader, helping them better understand the challenges, constraints, and responsibilities that come with leadership.

When subordinates trust leaders and leaders trust subordinates, their combined efforts become far more effective.

A large body of research highlights the importance of leaders showing empathy toward their followers, demonstrating its positive effects on motivation, well-being, and performance (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2025). Far less attention has been paid to follower-to-leader empathy or to how leaders can actively foster *upward* empathy. Even theories that address mutual relationships, such as Leader–Member Exchange, tend to treat follower empathy as an *outcome* of leadership behaviors rather than a skill to be deliberately cultivated (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Developing this kind of two-way empathy has the potential to deepen trust and shared purpose between leaders and followers, making it especially vital in contexts where teams face difficult or high-stakes tasks.

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This article offers a practical framework for building such two-way empathy. I describe “ten tips” for leaders to develop empathy for subordinates while also fostering in subordinates a deeper empathy for leadership itself

**Tip 1: A leader demonstrates empathy when they are able to do what they ask others to do.**

This is a statement of skills and experience.

The Fighter Squadron Commander should be an experienced fighter pilot. The manager of a software development department should be an experienced software engineer. The leader’s prior experience can create empathy for subordinates because the leader has experienced the difficulties that the subordinates are now experiencing. Likewise, subordinates may have empathy for the leader because they understand that the leader has the experience to understand the subordinates’ difficulties.

It is not necessary for the leader to be the best at the task. It is necessary that the leader be a good teacher for subordinates needing improvement. As French and Raven showed in their foundational work on the bases of social power, leaders who demonstrate competence earn respect and trust (French and Raven, 1959). Absent relevant prior experience, a leader’s attempt to teach subordinates will expose the leader’s incompetence.

It may be best to decline a new position if one does not have the requisite prior experience.

**Tip 2: Empathetic leaders are teachers who share their talent and experience with others.**

I know of no better way of building a leader’s empathy for subordinates and subordinates’ empathy

for the leader than to take the time to teach. Ingredients are:

1. **A receptive audience.** Empathetic teaching requires the student to be ready to listen and learn. As the saying, commonly attributed to Lao Tzu, goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”
2. **A jointly perceived need.** Empathetic teaching requires that both teacher and student feel a need for education and improvement.
3. **Teaching by example.** Empathetic teaching works best with specific and personal examples.
4. **A commitment of time and energy.** Empathetic teaching requires that both teacher and student make a commitment of time and energy.
5. **A willingness to take the risk.** Empathetic teaching requires the leader to share a part of themselves. One needs to cross the boundary between leader and subordinate. For example, “I once made the same mistake when I was in your position.”
6. **An attitude of caring and concern.** Empathetic teaching requires a rapport based on honest concern.

**Tip 3: Empathetic leaders work for the good of the organization, rather than for themselves.**

To build empathy with subordinates, leaders must demonstrate that they are motivated by the good of the organization, and by the good of their subordinates, rather than by self-interest. This must be apparent in the leader’s words and actions.

There is a saying: “The cream rises to the top—and so does the scum.” Subordinates do not have empathy for scum. Subordinates find ways to undermine those they perceive as motivated by self-interest.

#### Tip 4: Empathetic leaders do not abuse power and authority.

To build and maintain empathy among subordinates a leader must not abuse special privileges available to them and must not abuse power over subordinates. Abuse of special privileges will be noted by subordinates and will reduce their feelings of empathy. Ingredients are:

1. Leaders should not discuss their special privileges with subordinates.
2. Leaders should not flaunt their privileges.
3. Leaders should act with restraint with respect to their privileges. They should show a lack of interest or concern for these privileges.
4. Leaders should not seek to enhance existing privileges. Doing so will lose the empathy of the leader's superiors.
5. When promoted to a new position, the leader should review the accompanying privileges and decide which are necessary to execute the job and which can undermine empathy of subordinates. Leaders should eliminate or not take advantage of the latter.

As Lord Acton observed, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Acton, 1887/1907, p. 504). The more powerful a leader becomes, the more important the leader's restraint and avoidance of abuse of that power. Ingredients are:

1. Imagine that a respected superior is present and observing when we exercise our authority. How would the respected superior view our words and our actions?
2. Place ourselves in the shoes of our subordinate receiving our exercise of authority. How would the subordinate view our words and actions?
3. Question our motives for our words and actions. Are they proper?

How then should a leader exercise their power over subordinates? Empathetic leaders are not petty, cynical or sarcastic. They are advised: "Always be tactful and well-mannered and teach your subordinates to be the same. Avoid excessive sharpness or harshness of voice, which usually indicates the man who has shortcomings of his own to hide" (Rommel, 1953, p. 239).

The objective is results. When results are not forthcoming the objective is education and training. Violations must be punished, but the empathetic leader does not gain satisfaction from punishing.

#### Tip 5: Empathetic leaders show respect for subordinates' abilities.

The empathetic leader shows respect for subordinates' abilities by assessing their ability to successfully perform a task. It is destructive to empathy between leader and subordinate to either underestimate or overestimate the ability of a subordinate to perform a task. Ingredients are:

1. **Delegative.** Empathetic leaders should use this model when both leader and subordinate feel that the subordinate is fully capable of completing the assigned task and may even have an ability superior to the leader in the execution of the task.
2. **Participative.** Empathetic leaders should use this model when both leader and subordinate feel that the task may or may not be successfully performed by the subordinate. Greater oversight and participation by the leader is appropriate in this case.
3. **Directive.** Empathetic leaders should use this model when both leader and subordinate feel that the task will be difficult for the subordinate to perform. Direct oversight and participation are appropriate in this case.

Note that these management models assume that the leader and subordinate are correct and in agreement

with respect to the subordinate's ability to perform the task. When leader and subordinate are not in agreement, it is best not to proceed until a more coherent understanding between leader and subordinate is reached. Moreover, as the assignment progresses, it may become evident that the subordinate does not have the ability to perform the task that both leader and subordinate initially thought they had. In these cases movement from one management model to another will be necessary.

**Tip 6: Empathetic leaders implement a meritocracy for promotions, recognition and awards.**

Critically important to the success of a leader is the establishment and enforcement of a meritocracy within the organization. Individuals should be selected for promotion based on their superior likelihood of success. This is the definition of a true meritocracy. There is no room for nepotism, cronyism, promoting someone that the rest of the organization does not believe is the best candidate, or promoting from the outside when there is an equally qualified candidate inside the organization. Note that promoting from within usually results in multiple promotions as the positions of the promoted subordinates need replacements.

**Tip 7: Empathetic leaders criticize subordinates in private and praise in public.**

Empathetic leaders never critique a subordinate in front of their peers or subordinates. Ingredients are:

1. **Critique from command distance.** The more levels between the critic and the receiver of criticism, the more traumatic the criticism can feel.
2. **Critique of delegated assignments.** Empathetic leaders critique results, not methods—unless methods are “low integrity” or “high breakage.”

3. **Critique of participative activity.** When using a participative management model,
  - i. Propose a more effective method rather than criticize a subordinate's less effective method.
  - ii. Consider remaining silent to allow the subordinate to learn on their own.
4. **Critique from self-awareness.** The more the subordinate is upset with their own performance, the less the leader needs to say.

**Tip 8: Empathetic leaders understand and use the teaching benefit of poor results.**

This is a subtle phenomenon. In some cases the best strategy for the empathetic leader is to “stand back” and allow the subordinate to be impacted by the consequences of their own poor performance. There is no need for a leader to point out the benefits of a raincoat to a rain-soaked subordinate. Poor performance can be its own learning experience.

**Tip 9: Empathetic leaders respond to problems subordinates have outside the workplace.**

An empathetic leader has concern for the well-being of subordinates. When a subordinate is experiencing difficulties outside the workplace it must be second nature for the empathetic leader to be concerned, to show concern, and to provide assistance where possible and appropriate. Some adjustments at the workplace may be helpful. This needs to be genuine. One cannot successfully fake concern for others.

**Tip 10: Empathetic leaders assess and manage the empathy that subordinates feel for their leader, and the empathy the leader feels for subordinates.**

Empathetic leaders need to assess and develop empathy for subordinates. They need to know “where they

stand” with their subordinates. Empathetic leaders also need to assess and develop the empathy that subordinates feel toward them. These leadership traits need to be authentic. It is not possible to fake empathy.

## Summary

Leaders, especially military leaders, are called upon to ask subordinates to undertake difficult, even heroic assignments. If the leader has built a reservoir of empathy with subordinates and subordinates with the leader, subordinates will willingly do what they are asked to do. Absent empathy flowing in both directions, the result will not be ideal.

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