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# Empathetic Leadership: The Secret Of The Best Places To Work

By Joelle K. Jay, PhD

What kind of world do I want to work in? What kind of a world do I want to lead?

Talented leaders are asking these questions as they consider where to put their time and attention, what they want their legacy to be and what organizations support them in their efforts.

A recent NPR story entitled “Companies Are Starting to Lose the Few Female Leaders They Have” summarized research from LeanIn.org showing that women are underrepresented in leadership and that women are leaving companies at the highest rate they've seen.



While they identified a key reason for this trend (“because they are less likely to make it to the top”), our research at the Leadership Research Institute (LRI) reveals a deeper, more personal reason: They’re searching for a more compassionate work life.

In our research at LRI, we have met with senior executives in Fortune 500 companies to understand how they address the needs of leaders—especially, but not only, women—to feel valued and know that the organization in which they work values them, supports them and allows them to lead and live in congruence with who they want to be. We call it empathetic leadership.

In this article, I want to share essential elements of empathetic leadership that organizations may use to assess the degree to which they are places talented leaders want to work.

## Prioritizing Dignity And Respect

People don’t want to work where they aren’t valued. In our work as executive coaches and consultants in leading companies around the world, we see a painful resurgence of cruelty on one hand and an inspiring emphasis on empathy on the other. These inspiring stories deserve highlighting.



Gloria Chen, chief people officer and EVP of employee experience for Adobe, notes that people-centric culture was the intention of their founders. Chen explained that this commitment to inclusivity came from the founders—who strived to make Adobe a place where people want to work. It is the empathetic leadership that helps support this by building loyalty and trust among employees.

As former chief of staff to Adobe's CEO, Shantanu Narayen, Chen saw how Adobe's culture was supported from the top. Employees are treated with dignity. Today, Adobe respects employees by showcasing the unique, diverse, empowering stories their employees have to tell.

### **Expressing Authenticity**

A common theme among executives was the importance of authenticity in empathetic leadership. Steve Kemps, chief legal officer at S&P Global, is known for his openness about his own challenges and honors the struggles of others. Empathy in leaders comes from acknowledging vulnerabilities, which makes it safe for employees to be vulnerable, too. To Kemps, that kind of culture creates shared loyalty.

In his view, people come and go. They leave for bosses and stay for bosses. The empathetic leaders are going to win. Those authoritarian leaders—there's no amount of money he believes would be worth it to work for that kind of leader again.

According to our research, leaders are placing a high value on empathy as they vote with their feet: choosing either to stay in an organization that values empathy or moving to one that does.

Donna Morris, chief people officer for Walmart, explained that empathy is an act of understanding individuals and spending time with people who are very different than themselves.

She recommends that leaders role model that by being a good listener and being invested in people. If businesses ultimately exist to serve an end customer, the word there is *serve*.

To Morris, part of servant leadership is being an empathetic leader. Serving people includes understanding them and valuing them, with the authenticity characteristic of empathetic leadership.

### **Impacting Business Results**

One critique of empathetic leadership is that it is a “nice to have” in the competitive landscape in which businesses exist. The leaders in our research reject that point of view and connect empathetic leadership to business results.

Jenn Flynn, who leads Small Business Banking for Capital One, relays how critical empathetic leadership is to retaining customers. During the pandemic, she heard from business owners who were in true panic that they were going to lose their businesses. She listened and strove to understand them.



She mentioned that she enjoyed talking to business owners and that coming to the conversation from the prospect of trying to better understand their position to in turn better meet their needs helped her widen her view. It also gave her a chance to give grace and establish trust.

She connects that trust to business results.

Flynn recommends that leaders create psychological safety for their employees and offer their own stories to show they have been in similar situations. In her experience, that pays off. She explains that it's helpful to think back to a conversation where there was a strong sense of trust and empathy. In conversations where both trust and empathy are present, each side can leave feeling respected and appreciated.

To synthesize the views of these leaders—each identified for the value they place on empathetic leadership and each known for driving impressive business results—empathetic leadership can be captured in a simple formula.

### **Dignity And Respect + Authenticity = Loyalty And Business Results**

This may be the secret formula business leaders need for retaining talented leaders and being the best place for those leaders to work.

If you're a leader who wants to instill a sense of empathetic leadership in your organization, you can use this equation to assess the current culture and make positive changes.

You can start by asking yourself key questions, perhaps even digging into them with real data to get a realistic point of view.

For instance:

- Do your employees view you as a leader who treats them with dignity and respect? To what degree do they believe this same treatment exists throughout the culture of the company? What evidence do you have?
- Are you comfortable being authentic as a leader, and do you hold authentic conversations about your own vulnerabilities? Do you make it safe for your employees to be open and authentic? How do you know?
- Are you retaining your best, most talented employees? If so, what makes them want to stay, and if not, why do they leave? How can you get honest insight into these questions?
- Finally, what is the connection between your leadership, your company's culture and the business results you are achieving? Do you have evidence that your customers share your values and buy from you because they know you understand them?

Just reflecting on these questions and looking into data to back up your impressions will give you an idea of where you stand. Then you can choose to build on your successes or overcome your challenges by expressing the kind of empathetic leadership that makes people want to be their best and bring their best to their work.



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