

Leading with Empathy in an Era of Disconnection

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It is not surprising that a particular kind of silence may be misunderstood as harmony by a superior in a hierarchical workplace. In this culture, employees do not push back; meetings proceed without friction, and directives are followed without question. In many Southeast Asian countries, this silence is often shaped by deep-rooted norms around respect for authority and the preservation of face; however, beneath that surface, disengagement quietly emerges. In their 2021 report on workplace relationships, Aaron De Smet and associates at McKinsey discovered that the quality of an employee's relationship with their direct supervisor forecasts the employee's experience, and that burnout and attrition are prevalent in environments where leaders neglect the human aspects of work. The implication is unsettling but important to consider, and that is in societies where hierarchy is most established, the cost of leadership lacking empathy may be highest precisely because it is least evident.

Rethinking Empathy: Beyond Being "Nice"

Before diving deeper into that cost, it is worth being clear about what empathy in leadership actually means because it is a concept that is frequently misread, particularly in cultures where authority and emotional expression occupy separate domains. Empathy is not warmth, and it is not even the softening of standards. What is empathy, then? In his 2020 updated perspectives on emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman defines it as the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing and to use that perception purposefully. At its core, it is an informational skill that informs leaders about their teams in ways that performance statistics cannot.

For a moment, imagine a manager who notices that a usually reliable team member has become quieter in meetings and slower to respond to messages. Rather than attributing this to disengagement or poor attitude,

an empathically attuned leader reads these signals as information, something has shifted, and creates a quiet moment to check in. What emerges might be a personal difficulty, an unspoken concern about a project, or simple exhaustion. The leader has not lowered their standards; they have gathered intelligence that allows them to respond more effectively. That is empathy that functions not as sentiment, but as a leadership tool.

Chao Miao, Ronald H. Humphrey, and Shanshan Qian's 2020 meta-analysis found that empathy, a central component of emotional intelligence, is consistently associated with more constructive work attitudes and stronger interpersonal dynamics. This is significant in the Asian organizational context, as the argument here is not having less authoritative leaders, but is that authority exercised without empathic awareness is likely to be less effective than it could be. In other words, a leader who understands what their team is experiencing can better lead within the order, not against it.

Why Empathy Matters Now

The urgency of this conversation has intensified in recent years. Gallup's 2023 State of the Global Workplace Report documents that employee disengagement remains a global challenge, with particularly striking figures in East and Southeast Asia, where hierarchical norms may prevent the type of open feedback that would otherwise detect issues at an early stage. Gallup also suggests that Disengagement is not passive; it carries real costs in productivity, retention, and organizational capability. In rapidly developing economies like Cambodia's, where organizations are growing quickly and talent pipelines are still maturing, these costs are ones that few can afford to absorb quietly.

According to Harvard Business Review in 2022, empathy has become non-negotiable in modern leadership, due to the nature of work that has genuinely changed. Employees across contexts are navigating uncertainty, pressure, and competing demands; therefore, leaders

who cannot attune to these realities will consistently misread their teams and misallocate their attention. In a hierarchical culture, where employees are unlikely to volunteer and communicate that they are struggling, this attunement becomes not merely desirable but structurally necessary.

What Empathetic Leadership Looks Like in Practice

Practicing empathy within a hierarchical culture is genuinely difficult since the same norms that produce deference and respect also make it harder for employees to express concerns, admit confusion, or push back on decisions they disagree with. The leader who waits for their team to come forward, on the other hand, is likely to wait in silence. Empathetic leadership in this context is therefore more proactive than reactive, and it requires leaders to go beyond what is being said. This means listening beyond surface-level communication and paying attention not only to what is said in meetings, but to what is communicated through hesitation, through the questions that are not asked, through the body language of someone who is nodding but not yet convinced. It also means building the kind of consistency over time that makes it feel safer for employees to speak. Guangya Ma and colleagues, in a 2024 study, suggest that empathetic leadership promotes employee innovation by generating psychological empowerment, a sense that one's voice matters, and that taking initiative carries less risk. In cultures where that sense is not automatic, it should be deliberately constructed, one interaction at a time.

Two practices are worth naming directly. The first is normalizing imperfect answers; that is, when leaders openly invite questions, respond without judgment to mistakes, and occasionally admit their own uncertainty, they gradually lower the cost of speaking up. The second is consistency in small moments, for instance, greeting team members individually, following up on something mentioned in a previous conversation, or simply pausing long enough after asking a question to make clear that an honest answer is genuinely welcome. These are not grand gestures; they are the quiet, repeated signals through which psychological safety is built one interaction at a time.

Contextual awareness is equally important. A leader who understands that a team member's quietness in a

meeting reflects cultural respect rather than agreement, or that a reluctance to ask questions signals anxiety about face rather than comprehension, is better equipped to respond constructively. These are not adjustments that require abandoning authority; they are refinements that make authority more effective.

The Shadow Side of Empathy

A thoughtful discussion of empathetic leadership cannot afford to overlook its limitations and there are real ones. The first is what is described as empathy fatigue which is the emotional exhaustion that accumulates when leaders absorb, repeatedly and deeply, the stress and pain of those around them. This is not a minor inconvenience, as chronic empathic distress has been linked to the depletion of motivation and reward-processing capacity, and its symptoms, including emotional withdrawal, diminished engagement, a quiet loss of joy in the work, reflect the very burnout that empathetic leadership is meant to prevent. A leader who gives too much of themselves emotionally, without sufficient recovery, eventually has little left to offer. Paul Bloom's concept of rational compassion is a key here. This theory suggests that the goal is not to feel everything others feel, but to understand it well enough to act effectively, caring for others while preserving the capacity to continue doing so.

Another point to consider, which is subtler but equally consequential, is that empathy is not impartial. Leaders tend to empathize most readily with those who are most similar to them, most visible, or whose difficulties are most emotionally vivid. This empathic bias can quietly distort decisions about opportunities, recognition, and support, and result in favoring those who resonate emotionally over those who may be equally or more deserving. In hierarchical cultures, where proximity to leadership already shapes access to resources, this bias can compound existing inequities without anyone intending it to. The implication is not that empathy should be abandoned, but that it should be practiced with self-awareness. This means leaders need to notice not only what they are feeling, but whose experience they may be failing to see.

A Leadership Imperative

Deloitte's 2023 Global Human Capital Trends Report identifies human-centered leadership as among the most critical organizational capabilities of the decade ahead. For organizations in Cambodia and across Southeast Asia, this is not simply an imported Western concept to be adopted or adapted; it is a response to a genuine and local challenge. As workforces become younger, more educated, and more aware of what good leadership looks like, the gap between what employees experience and what they expect is likely to widen in organizations that do not attend to it. Hierarchy itself is not the obstacle here, but hierarchy without empathy is. The leaders who will matter most in the years ahead are those who can hold authority and attunement together and can understand that knowing their people more deeply does not diminish their leadership, but extends its reach. In an era marked by disconnection, empathy may well be what determines whether leadership simply functions or truly resonates.