

WOMEN AT THE HELM - EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP AND ETHICAL EXCELLENCE

Abstract

On the occasion of International Women's Day, it is indeed heartening to put out this article that talks about the growth of successful women leaders in the world and the uniqueness with which they are leading. The article focuses on empathetic leadership while finding the connection between empathy and ethics and discussing how leading with empathy also gives way to ethical excellence in organizations. While understanding the benefits of empathetic leadership that women leaders are demonstrating, the cautions relating to unconscious bias also need to be kept in mind. Finally, in discussing empathetic leadership, the L-E-A-D-E-R model is discussed that brings out specific behaviours and traits that are practiced by such leaders and that can be a guide to potential leaders of the future.

Introduction

The debate between management and leadership is age old and leadership has often been the clear winner in a battle of wits. The dominance of leadership skills being an essential ability to be developed has grown over the years with sociologists, thinkers, psychologists and other experts exploring and researching various models of leadership. One such model that has received significant attention has been 'Empathetic leadership'. In a business environment where an authoritative chain of command and the transactional chain have almost ceased to exist, the ability to collaborate and forge meaningful connections while developing relationships based on trust has risen as the clear winner.



CMA (Dr.) Vidya Parikh

Managing Director
Eternus Global Pte Ltd
Singapore

vidyaparikh@gmail.com

Empathy is one of the important elements of emotional intelligence, and it is often misconstrued to be just another soft skill. However, that is not to be. Top leaders such as Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft have time and again identified 'empathy' as a business essential, a requirement for leaders and even labelled empathy as being a 'workplace superpower'. Without a strong sense of empathy in understanding people from their perspective, or seeing problems as they see it, organizations are not going to be able to find the right solutions that could meet the unarticulated needs of the customers. As per Deliu (2019), empathy is in fact that distinguishing trait and that fundamental marker that sets apart an exceptional leadership from an ordinary one.

Women and empathetic leadership

The foray of women into leadership roles has risen steadily over the years with factors such as more access to education, defiance of traditional gender boundaries and demonstration of women's achievements giving them the distinctive strength to break the proverbial glass ceiling and move ahead (Ni, 2024). According to Frangos (2021), women

getting to the helm of affairs in organizations are not seen following the leadership footprint of men but instead are found to be creating new pathways that are defined by inclusivity and diversity, largely driven by their empathetic approach and holistic views. In 2021 researchers from the University of Paris worked with S&P global and found that across companies and countries, female CEOs often demonstrated the traits of empathy and adaptableness often more than their male counterparts (Frangos, 2021). Combining that with the results of the 2019 S&P Global Markets Intelligence Study that indicated superior stock price, profitability and board diversity, in organizations run by women in the C-suite, clearly indicate that traits like empathy and compassion that were less prominent requirements in the list of leadership competencies are now taking strategic centre stage. It is also proving that empathetic leadership is calling for a change in the culture of organizations to use approaches and methods defined majorly by the woman's leadership style without having to forego excellence in performance and results thereby paving the way for well-balanced organizational environments, favouring what the future of business really needs.

Examples of empathetic leadership

Numerous examples and case studies in real life stand testimony to the research that talks of women leaders practising empathetic leadership successfully and making a significant mark in their fields of work as well as trailblazing new leadership cultures. Here are a few:

The ex- Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, became a worldwide symbol of how empathy-driven leadership could tackle difficult crises successfully by leading the country through the Christchurch attack as well as COVID-19 (Admin, 2024). Jacinda Ardern dissented the common belief that being empathetic was to be equated with weakness and she truly proved herself right by being both compassionate and strong at the same time (Pavlovic, 2025).

Sheryl Sandberg is another example of successful empathetic leadership. As the COO of Facebook, she drove several initiatives to support women in the workplace and she is known for encouraging discussions about personal struggles and grief and

other adversity to build resilience and this led to the creation of a more empathetic corporate culture (Admin, 2024).

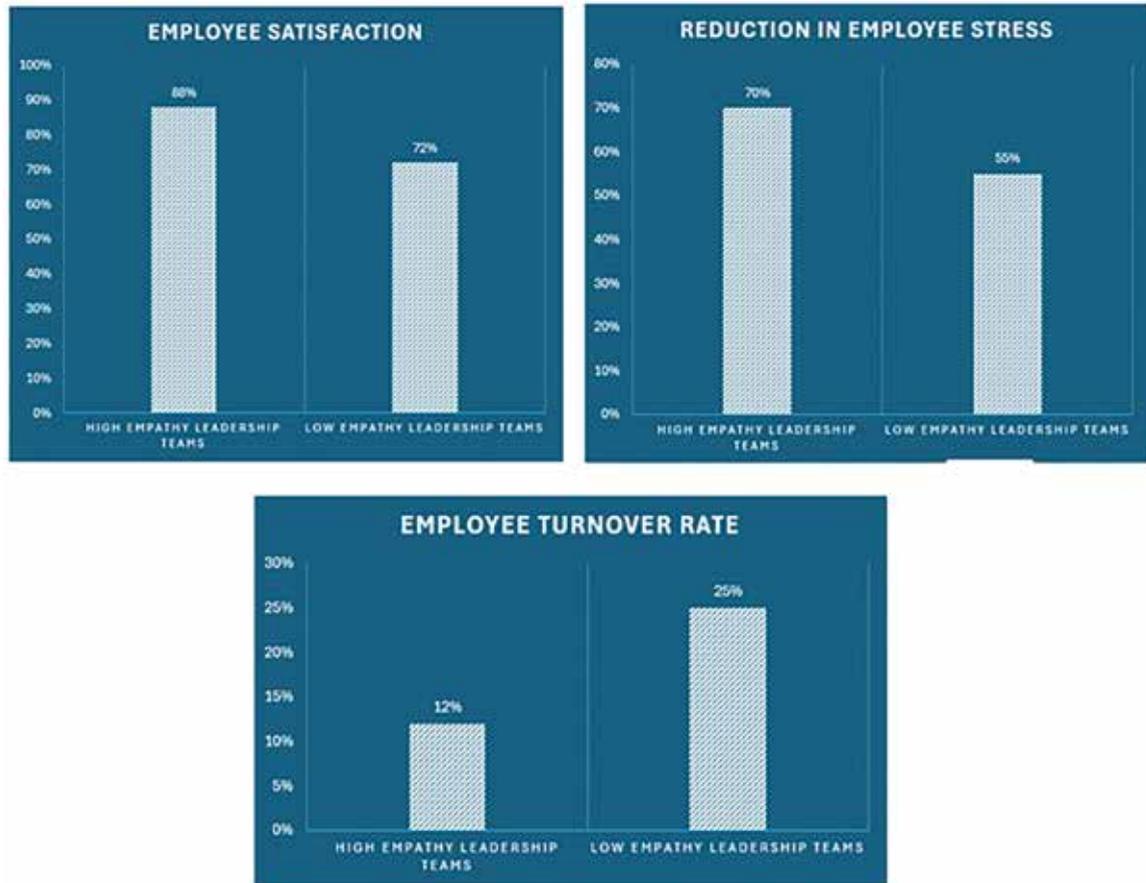
Former PepsiCo CEO, Indra Nooyi is another great example. As one of the world's most powerful women executives, Nooyi was known to have launched an initiative within the organization called 'Performance with Purpose' that would help companies focus on doing good to society while making money. Her thoughts on diversity, equity and inclusion stem from her ability to embrace others' perspectives- a stark example of empathetic leadership (Dialogueproject@Duke, 2024).

Global CEO of Chanel, Leena Nair is a firm believer of leading with empathy. She firmly believes that business involves doing tough things, but they can very well be done with compassion and empathy, because decisive actions can be properly done when it is done with the person in mind and where the human being who is impacted by the decisions matters (McDowell, 2025).

Besides, who does not know Sudha Murthy, the Chairperson of the Infosys Foundation, whose journey exemplifies the power of acting with empathy that has and continues to inspire leaders around the world (Team-IBM, 2025).

Benefits of empathetic leadership

Empathetic leaders are found to be able to retain talent as well as improve productivity in organizations due to their ability to create safe environments, build trust and create a more positive experience at work driven by inclusivity and compassion. When leaders are empathetic, there is less burnout and team members are motivated, consequently improving performance. It is not surprising therefore that with empathetic leadership, employees experience better job satisfaction while being encouraged to innovate and promote creativity because empathetic leaders create harmonious ecosystems at work and emphasize building of collaborative and cohesive teams (Ni, 2024). The study by McKinsey and Company that released the Empathy in the Workplace Report in 2022 (See Figure 1 below), as per Ni (2024), stands testimony to the power of empathetic leadership in bringing enormous benefits to organizations and delivering value-based outcomes.

Figure 1: *Benefits of empathetic leadership (The Empathy in the Workplace Report, 2022)*

Empathy and Ethics

It is true that leadership behaviours play a key role in determining the culture of the organization as well as the behaviour of subordinates. Empathetic leaders are supportive and through such support, leaders can foster positive behaviour from people even in stressful situations. Empathy and compassion help trigger reciprocal behaviours that show care for others and put the wellbeing of the organization on priority, thereby eliciting altruistic behaviours from both leaders and others (Sguera et al., 2016). Besides, empathetic leaders also serve as role models for subordinates encouraging positive ethical behaviour. Optimistic work outcomes resulting from empathetic leadership include the development of ethical practices and the demonstration of ethical behaviour in the best interest of the organization and its people. Empathy creates high self-esteem amongst the employees and while social psychologists have repeatedly found a positive relationship between

low self-esteem and immoral behaviour, it goes to show that ethical behaviour is greatly valued and presented in empathetic environments. Inspiring loyalty and dedication to upholding ethical values is greatly influenced by empathy. In writing about the human side of compliance, Jack (2025), identified empathy as the power necessary for running a business ethically. All stakeholders from employees to management, to vendors customers and shareholders need to be an integral part of an organization's ethical program and empathy can push them to share the ethical values of the leaders and integrate with the organization's culture. Empathy endorses honest communication and healthy relationships and thus empowers people to call out wrongdoing as well as stand by what is right.

Some Cautions

As with any model of leadership, empathetic leadership is not without its troubles if used

inappropriately. Sometimes when supervisors display a high level of empathy and demonstrate understanding other's perspectives, employees perceive acceptance of lower organizational standards assuming that their position, however substandard it may be, would be acknowledged by the leaders. When ethical boundaries are seen as flexible and when empathy conceals the idea of intolerance to unethical behaviours, risk of misconduct often increases (Zhang et al., 2024).

Another caution relates to interpreting empathy as being 'nice' to others. Overdoing this can inhibit development as 'being nice' very often erases any scope for constructive feedback or corrective actions. Empathetic leaders and women leaders more so, when seen as being too nice are often understood as being soft, incapable of checking misbehaviour or unethical practices and inept at decision making. Such empathy is also often seen to lead to biased decisions in favour of being nice at the cost of being right.

Empathetic behaviour of leaders may often be misused and abused. Being empathetic for too long without adequate reciprocal behaviour or having to exert high effort to display empathy can also cause empathy exhaustion or compassion fatigue, a condition where a person's limits are tested causing it to boomerang into frustrated, impatient and aggressive behaviour (Larsson, 2020).

While there are things to be wary of, all is not lost and empathetic behaviour is still rewarding. Prioritizing self-care and exhibiting high emotional intelligence through self-awareness and self-control can ensure that empathy is practised in a way that brings great benefits for the individual, the organization and its stakeholders.

The Path Ahead

As the workplace needs are evolving with the changing dynamics of the workforce, the need to address organizational issues with more empathetic strategic thinking seems to be the need of the hour. While talking about developing empathy, it is interesting to look at some of the ways in which women leaders practice or demonstrate empathetic leadership. The use of the L-E-A-D-E-R model that highlights specific behaviours that result in the manifestation of empathy at the workplace can

guide potential leaders. The L-E-A-D-E-R model of demonstrating empathy may be described as follows:

L: Listening:

Listening skills are an important component of communication skills. Active listening skills are vital to being empathetic. One can understand another better only by actively listening to what another has to say. Listening involves focussing to closely follow what the speaker is saying and understanding it correctly by asking relevant questions and paraphrasing.

E: Engage:

Engaging people is a sign of empathetic behaviour. Engaging involves empowering people and involving them in the activities and decisions of the organization so that their views and contributions are accorded due respect and consideration. Engaging involves fostering a deeper connection, encouraging active participation and developing meaningful interaction, all of which are signs of empathetic behaviour.

A: Acceptance:

An attitude of acceptance is essential for empathetic leadership. Acceptance includes embracing diversity and differences and creating an inclusive environment that is a psychologically safe haven for people to be themselves, to express themselves without fear, where people are respected and accepted without being discriminated.

D: Dependability:

Dependability is a core skill for empathetic leaders. Leaders who are dependable command a high level of respect and following and this trait of dependability of leaders, helps create a work environment that is highly productive and innovative. Dependability complements empathetic leadership by building a sense of commitment, reliability and trust .

E: Emotionally intelligent:

While empathy is an element of emotional intelligence, other aspects of emotions intelligence

such as self-awareness and self-control, may be the foundations of balancing and exuding the right amount of empathetic behaviour. When one understands oneself better and is conscious of one's emotional triggers and cognitive biases, one is in a better position to understand others and connect with them. Displaying a high level of emotional intelligence is distinctive of empathetic leaders.

R: Reframing:

Empathy is about being able to put oneself in others' shoes and see things from their perspective. Reframing or being able to see things in a new light is essential for empathy. Being able to change one's perspective when looking at an issue and accepting a different view with positivity in outlook is a hallmark of empathetic leadership. Such a mindset can open doors to better understanding and communication, leading to valuable outcomes for organizations.

The path ahead is promising as empathy in leadership can go a long way in enhancing organizational effectiveness and promoting ethical excellence. Women leaders armed with their distinct ability at leading with empathy can indeed spearhead this leadership track in creating the leaders of the future by nurturing in people the rights skills and behaviours for developing empathetic leaders who are committed, creative and accountable in building resilient and agile organizations. 

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