WHITE PAPER

Empathy in the Workplace
A Tool for Effective Leadership*

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Center for Creative Leadership®



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Introduction

A top priority for many organizations is to look beyond traditional strategies for management development and recruitment to create a cadre of leaders capable of moving the company forward.

And no wonder. Ineffective managers are expensive, costing organizations millions of dollars each year in direct and indirect costs. Surprisingly, **ineffective managers make up half of the today's organizational management pool**, according to a series of studies (see Gentry, 2010; Gentry & Chappelow, 2009).

With such high stakes, talent management and human resource professionals as well as senior executives are pursuing multiple strategies for developing more effective managers and leaders.

Managers, too, may be surprised that so many of their peers are underperforming. It's a smart move for individual managers, then, to figure out how they rank and what skills are needed to improve their chances of success.

One of those skills, perhaps unexpectedly, is empathy.

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Empathy and Performance: What's the Connection?

Empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experience of others. Empathy is more than simple sympathy, which is being able to understand and support others with compassion or sensitivity.

Empathy is a construct that is fundamental to leadership. **Many leadership theories suggest the ability to have and display empathy is an important part of leadership.** Transformational leaders need empathy in order to show their followers that they care for their needs and achievement (Bass, 1985). Authentic leaders also need to have empathy in order to be aware of others (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Empathy is also a key part of emotional intelligence that several researchers believe is critical to being an effective leader (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; George, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Empathy is one factor in relationships. For several years, research and work with leaders by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) has shown that the nature of leadership is shifting, placing a greater emphasis on building and maintaining relationships. **Leaders today need to be more person-focused and be able to work with those not just in the next cubicle, but also with those in other buildings, or other countries.** For instance, past CCL research such as the Changing Nature of Leadership or Leadership Gap or Leadership Across Difference show that leaders now need to lead people, collaborate with others, be able to cross organizational and cultural boundaries and need to create shared direction, alignment, and commitment between social groups with very different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures. It stands to reason that empathy would go a long way toward meeting these people-oriented managerial and leadership requirements.

To understand if empathy has an influence on a manager's job performance, CCL analyzed data from 6,731 managers from 38 countries. Key findings of the study are:

- Empathy is positively related to job performance.
- Empathy is more important to job performance in some cultures than others.

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The Research

To better understand how leaders can be effective in their jobs, CCL conducted a study to address two key issues:

1. Successful Job Performance:

Is empathy needed to be successful in a leader's job?

2. Cross-Cultural Issues:

Does empathy influence success more in some cultures than others?

To answer these questions, we analyzed leaders' empathy based on their behavior. **Having empathy is not the same thing as demonstrating empathy.** Conveying empathic emotion is defined as the ability to understand what others are feeling (Duan, 2000; Duan & Hill, 1996; Goleman, 2006), the ability to actively share emotions with others, and passively experiencing the feelings of others (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006) in order to be effective.

We searched CCL's database and identified a sample of 6,731 leaders from 38 countries. (See Table 1 on page 11 for the number of managers from each country and Table 2 on page 12 for demographic information.) These leaders had at least three subordinates rate them on the display of empathic emotion as measured by CCL's Benchmarks® 360-degree instrument. Subordinates rated managers on four items:

- Is sensitive to signs of overwork in others.
- Shows interest in the needs, hopes, and dreams of other people.
- Is willing to help an employee with personal problems.
- Conveys compassion toward them when other people disclose a personal loss.

Questions were measured on a 5-point scale with 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *to a very great extent*.

Each manager in the sample also had one boss rate them on three items that measured job performance:

- "How would you rate this person's performance in his/her present job" (1 = *among the worst* to 5 = *among the best*);
- "Where would you place this person as a leader compared to other leaders inside and outside your organization" (1 = *among the worst* to 5 = *among the best*); and
- "What is the likelihood that this person will derail (i.e., plateau, be demoted, or fired) in the next five years as a result of his/her actions or behaviors as a manager?" (1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *almost certain*).

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The Findings

Our results reveal that empathy is positively related to job performance. Managers who show more empathy toward direct reports are viewed as better performers in their job by their bosses.

The findings were consistent across the sample: **empathic emotion as rated from the leader's subordinates positively predicts job performance ratings from the leader's boss**.

While empathy is clearly important to the full sample and across all the countries in the study, the research shows that the relationship between empathy and performance is stronger in some cultures more than others.

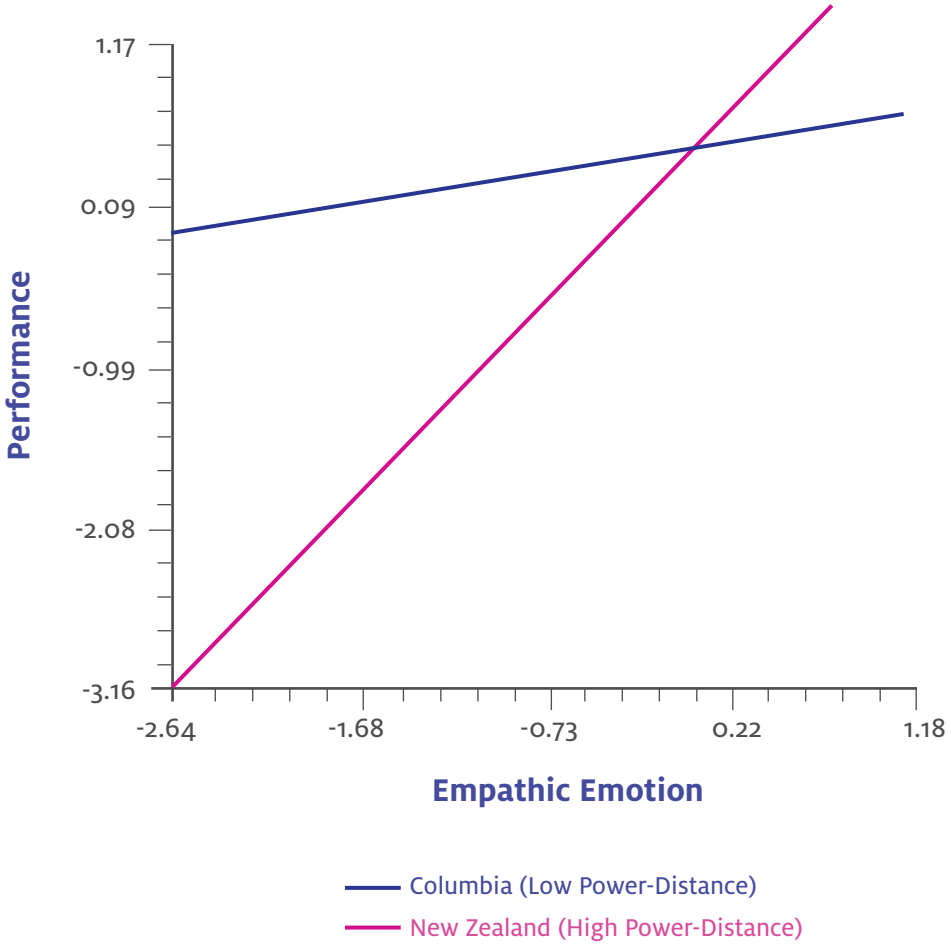
We found that the positive relationship between empathic emotion and performance is greater for managers living in high power-distance countries, making empathy even more critical to performance for managers operating in those cultures.

Power distance is defined as "the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at higher levels of an organization or government" (House & Javidan, 2004, p. 12). Cultures with high power distance believe that power should be concentrated at higher levels. Such cultures believe that power provides harmony, social order, and role stability. China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Malaysia, New Zealand, Poland, Singapore, and Taiwan are all considered high power-distance countries (see Table 1 on page 11).

In high power-distance cultures, paternalism characterizes leader-subordinate relationships, where a leader will assume the role of a parent and feel obligated to provide support and protection to subordinates under his or her care (Yan & Hunt, 2005). The results of our study suggest that **empathic emotion plays an important role in creating this paternalistic climate of support and protection to promote successful job performance in these high power-distance cultures**.

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Figure 1



Comparing Empathy Across Cultures. As the example below shows, empathy is more strongly tied to performance in New Zealand (a high power-distance culture) than it is in Colombia (a low power-distance culture). This distinction was found to be consistent when evaluating the importance of empathy in 38 low, mid and high power-distance countries.

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Empathy Can Be Learned

To improve their performance and effectiveness, leaders may need to develop the capability to demonstrate empathy.

Some people naturally exude empathy and have an advantage over their peers who have difficulty expressing empathy. Most leaders fall in the middle and are sometimes or somewhat empathetic.

Fortunately, empathy is not a fixed trait. It can be learned (Shapiro, 2002). If given enough time and support, **leaders can develop and enhance their empathy skills through coaching, training, or developmental opportunities and initiatives.**

Organizations can encourage a more empathetic workplace and help managers improve their empathy skills in a number of simple ways:

Talk about empathy. Let managers know that empathy matters. Though task-oriented skills like monitoring, planning, controlling and commanding performance or "making the numbers" are important, understanding, caring, and developing others is just as important, if not more important, particularly in today's workforce. Explain that **giving time and attention to others fosters empathy, which in turn, enhances your performance and improves your perceived effectiveness**. Specific measures of empathy can be used (such as the Benchmarks assessment used in this research) to give feedback about individual and organizational capacity for empathy.

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Teach listening skills. To understand others and sense what they are feeling, managers must be good listeners. Skilled listeners let others know that they are being heard, and they express understanding of concerns and problems. **When a manager is a good listener, people feel respected and trust can grow.** Specific listening skills include:

- **Listen to hear the meaning behind what others are saying.** Pay particular attention to nonverbal cues. Emotion expressed nonverbally may be more telling than the words people speak. Focus on tone of voice, pace of speech, facial expressions, and gestures.

- **Be an active listener.** Active listening is a person's willingness and ability to hear and understand someone else. Active listeners are able to reflect the feelings expressed and summarize what they are hearing. There are several key skills all active listeners share:

  - They pay attention to others.
  - They hold judgment.
  - They reflect by paraphrasing information. They may say something like "What I hear you saying is . . . "
  - They clarify if they don't understand what was said, like "What are your thoughts on . . . " or "I don't quite understand what you are saying, could you repeat that . . . "
  - They summarize, giving a brief restatement on what they just heard.
  - They share. They are active participants in the dialogue by saying, for example, "That sounds like something I went through."

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Encourage genuine perspective taking. Managers consistently should put themselves in the other person's place. As Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* famously said: **"You can never understand someone unless you understand their point of view, climb in that person's skin, or stand and walk in that person's shoes."** For managers, this includes taking into account the personal experience or perspective of their employees. It also can be applied to solving problems, managing conflicting, or driving innovation.

Cultivate compassion. Support managers who care about how someone else feels or consider the effects that business decisions have on employees, customers, and communities. **Go beyond the standard-issue values statement and allow time for compassionate reflection and response.**

Support global managers. The ability to be empathetic is especially important for leaders working in global organizations or across cultural boundaries (Alon & Higgins, 2005) or for leaders getting ready for expatriate assignments (Harris & Moran, 1987; Jokinen, 2005; Mendez-Russell, 2001). **Working across cultures requires managers to understand people who have very different perspectives and experiences.** Empathy generates an interest in and appreciation for others, paving the way to more productive working relationships.

Managers would also benefit from knowing if the "power-distance" attributes are high, medium, or low in the countries in which they operate. The higher the power-distance needs, the more emphasis and attention should be given to teaching (and practicing) empathy.

When managers increase their awareness and understanding of empathy (particularly in their cultural context), they can identify behaviors they can improve and situations where showing their empathy could make a difference. **As managers hone their empathy skills through listening, perspective taking, and compassion, they are improving their leadership effectiveness and increasing the chances of success in the job.**

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Conclusion

The opportunity costs of keeping a manager who underperforms are often weighed against the costs of recruiting, hiring, and getting the new manager up to speed. **But with 50% of managers seen as poor performers or failures in their jobs (Gentry, 2010; Gentry and Chappelow, 2009) organizations must recognize the value in improving the managerial and leadership skills within their existing employee base.** As one of CCL's efforts to better understand the skills and behaviors leaders need to be effective in various parts of the world, this study examined the role that empathy plays in effective leadership.

This study found that the ability to understand what others are feeling is a skill that clearly contributes to effective leadership. In some cultures, the connection between empathy and performance is particularly striking, placing an even greater value on empathy as a leadership skill.

The reasons behind the strong correlation of empathy and effectiveness were not evaluated in this study. We presume, however, that **empathetic leaders are assets to organizations, in part, because they are able to effectively build and maintain relationships—a critical part of leading organizations anywhere in the world.**

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Table 1

Number of Managers within Each Country for the Present Study

Country	*n*	Power Distance
Argentina	53	Low
Australia	378	Medium
Austria	39	Low
Brazil	94	Low
Canada	875	Medium
China	68	High
Columbia	30	Low
Denmark	72	Medium
Egypt	66	High
Finland	39	Low
France	244	Medium
Germany	274	Medium
Greece	27	Low
Hong Kong	54	High
India	235	Medium
Indonesia	80	Medium
Ireland	144	Medium
Italy	66	Low
Japan	58	Medium
Malaysia	48	High
Mexico	229	Medium
Netherlands	334	Low
New Zealand	192	High
Philippines	85	Medium
Poland	52	High
Portugal	37	low
Russia	33	Medium
Singapore	387	Medium
South Korea	75	Medium
Spain	278	Low
Sweden	64	Medium
Switzerland	86	Medium
Taiwan	38	High
Thailand	44	Medium
Turkey	58	Low
United Kingdom	865	Medium
United States	900	Medium
Venezuela	30	Low

Note: Classification of countries as being in High, Medium, and Low power-distance cultures came from the chapter written by Carl Gupta, and Javidan in the House et al. book entitled *Culture, Leadership and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*. For the purposes of this table, countries in Band A and B in the book are high (greater power-distance), Band C is medium, and Band D and E are low (low power-distance).

Table 2

Demographics of the Managers

Variable	%
Gender	
Male	74.0%
Female	26.0%
Age	
26–34	16.38%
35–44	52.24%
45–54	28.42%
55–64	2.96%
Organization Level	
First Level	1.72%
Middle Level	19.49%
Upper Middle Level	48.31%
Executive Level	26.46%
Top Level	4.01%

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