

The Critical Role of Empathy in Leadership

Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.

+ President & CEO, SHRM



Driving social and economic change in the workplace, Taylor leads SHRM toward fostering mutually beneficial work environments, reaching 300,000+ members in 165+ countries who impact the lives of 110+ million workers every day. As a sought-after voice on matters affecting work, he is frequently invited to testify before Congress on critical workforce issues and authors a weekly column, "Ask HR," in *USA Today*. His decades of industry leadership have shaped his knowledge and perspective as an expert in his field. His latest book is *Reset*.

Society for Human Resource Management President and CEO Johnny C. Taylor, Jr. discusses the critical need for empathy in our world today, and why it's so easy for us to lack empathy. Johnny offers us three practices to help us work together to make our communities and organizations better by learning to exercise our "empathy muscle."

Understand what Empathy Is

Through a hypothetical example of someone's declining work performance, Johnny lays out a definition of empathy, and it's important. Empathy is trying to understand what people are experiencing in their lives.

As a team, discuss when you have experienced empathy from a leader and how that impacted your life?

Assess Your Empathy Muscle

Johnny says that empathy is inherent to us as human beings, but many of us just need to exercise it more.

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not empathetic at all; 5 = highly aware and empathetic to others), how would you assess empathy:

Yours?

Your team?

Your organization?

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Talk about ways you see empathy show up or not show up in each of these situations?

Build a Foundation of Trust

By being willing to truly listen and understand what people are going through in their lives, Johnny says we can begin to build a baseline of understanding and trust, and *only then* can we begin to work together to find a way forward.

What does it look like when there is a low level of understanding and trust on a team? What is the cost to a team or organization?

What would you say is the status of your baseline of understanding and trust in your team or organization? Is there anyone that might benefit from some empathy?

Write their name down and one way you could be more empathic in this relationship.

Practices to Increase Empathy

Johnny offers three practices that help leaders increase empathy:

1. Engage in discussions, not debates: Listen to learn, not assert.
2. Embrace diversity: Meet people where they are and understand how they got that way before you try to take them where you believe they need to go.
3. Be kinder: little things like handwritten notes matter.

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As a team, take some time to discuss which practice comes the easiest for you? Which is the hardest?

Take time to personally, reflect on which ONE you can commit to increasing, and how that commitment will be lived out.

Embrace the Vision of Empathy

According to Johnny, the result of truly seeing someone's humanity is that we treat them with civility, respect, and love.

How would your team/organization look different if greater levels of civility, respect, and love governed your work together? Take some time as a team to discuss.

Act

Commit to one thing you can do different as a result of this talk.