

RECONCILING EMPATHY AND DIFFICULT DECISIONS

On Being Tough *and* Empathic

In this post I would like to address a perceptive question that was raised when I was speaking recently to a professional women's group in Lisbon. We were discussing conflict in the workplace, and the question was: 'How can CEOs be empathic and build trust when they have to make decisions that will cost people their jobs?'

In my answer I focused on practical actions that a leader might take to build empathy and trust, but I sensed several additional nuances in her question and I would like to expand on those here. There are three key points I would like to make about empathy and tough decisions.

Leaders aren't always popular. This is a reality of leadership: if you are the person making the decisions in a business or organization, the one ultimately held accountable for results, you are not always going to be well-liked. Sometimes we are dazzled by the ostensible 'perks' of leadership – power, prestige, perhaps fame and wealth – and we forget that it is very often a demanding and lonely role. So my instinctive thought when the question above was posed was, 'We can talk about how your CEO can be empathic and build trust with stakeholders, but that won't make him popular, nor will it make everyone happy with his decisions.' Leaders just need to accept this fact.



Perceived motives are important. In my experience, most people will give you the benefit of the doubt if they believe you are doing your best and trying to do the right thing. There can of course be considerable debate about what constitutes the 'right thing', but people will usually give you a chance if they think your motives are good. On the other hand, if someone is perceived as selfish, ambitiously opportunistic, or untrustworthy, it is going to be very difficult to build empathy and trust. A thoughtful, self-aware leader needs to understand his or her personal motivations and anticipate how his or her decisions will be perceived by other people.

Listening is key. I bang this drum constantly: listening is the foundation of empathy. Listening well is a discipline and an art, and to be fair there are plenty of reasons why a leader may not listen well: the pressures of decision-making, a jam-packed schedule, the siren call of technology, the perils of multi-tasking, and a perceived lack

of time. Yet if we can discipline ourselves to slow down and focus on the other person's concerns, suspending our own agendas and concerns for a moment, we will begin to see a difference: the other person will feel heard, and the foundation stones for empathy and trust will have been laid. Give it a try.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Brown is a leadership educator and author based in Lisbon, Portugal. He likes to swim and play the piano, but not at the same time. He has worked as a consultant, executive mentor, and professor for 20 years, with individuals of 70 nationalities. Mark is currently a director of a Portuguese company providing leadership development services to organizations around the world.