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Empathy: The hard but important skill

Empathy has become something of a buzz word in business recently. Alex Efthymiades, co-founder of workplace mediation experts Consensio, explores why and how workplaces can encourage more empathy...

In this article you will learn:

- What other people have said about empathy
- Why empathy is important
- How companies are encouraging their employees to be more empathic

A few years ago, I read an article in the Harvard Business Review titled ‘Corporate Empathy is not an Oxymoron’. The article discusses the importance of corporate empathy and states: “Empathy should be embedded into the entire organisation: There is nothing soft about it. It is a hard skill that should be required from the board-room to the shop floor.”

More recently, mainstream publications such as Forbes and the Financial Times have published similar articles, outlining the many benefits of corporate empathy. At Consensio, we have been trying to foster this idea for over a decade. For us, it seems obvious that empathic workplaces significantly contribute to employee wellbeing and therefore an organisation’s success. However, although organisations are beginning to recognise the need for corporate empathy, the theory is sometimes still very far from the practice.



There are many reasons why empathy is relevant and important in the workplace. One reason for this is that respect, feeling valued and empathy go hand-in-hand. It is when we show empathy for people that we work with, be they our superiors, colleagues or employees, that they are more likely to feel respected and valued. We all want to feel that our contributions are noted, but also that how we are as people is respected. We all want to feel that we are treated as a human being in the workplace.

As a workplace mediation and conflict management provider, the concept of corporate empathy, or lack thereof, comes up over and over in our work with clients. We see a general trend in that many people at work don't feel respected or valued and they don't feel that the organisation for which they work cares about them. Just last month, the Financial Times published an interview with Zeynep Ton, who set up the Good Job Institute in the US last year "to help companies flourish by creating better jobs." According to Professor Ton, who interviewed service workers, "respect" was one word she kept hearing too. It is undeniable that the culture of our workplace has a significant impact on our wellbeing.

Understanding and appreciating what workers within all levels of an organisation are going through results in a more empathic and caring culture. And it is this culture that fosters loyalty, trust and respect. Yet the focus continues to be on equipping people with the technical skills to do their jobs, and not the people skills to become empathic leaders. Why? Because there is still the inherent belief in most organisations that emotions have no place in corporate life. That bringing emotions, or indeed empathy, to the corporate landscape is unprofessional, soft and irrelevant to the job at hand.



But empathy is not a soft skill, but a skill that organisations would do well to harness. This can be achieved in different ways, for example by training your leaders on how empathy can help them become more effective leaders by listening to the people that they manage, by respecting their opinions (even if you disagree with them), and by showing that you care about them as people. There are also small steps that each of us can take to bring more empathy to our place of work; to momentarily silence our opinions, to try to see our colleagues' points of view, and to take the time to really listen to the perspectives of others. This approach takes time, which is a precious commodity in the current workplace, where we are being asked to do more with less. However, empathy investment will result in a more engaged workforce, and ultimately, business success.