

## Enable Manager Empathy to Foster Flexible Work

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Initiatives: [Executive Leadership](#); [Talent](#); [Employee Experience](#)

To succeed in the hybrid work environment and offer radical flexibility to employees, managers need to lead with empathy. Executive leaders must enable managers to overcome the three barriers to leading with empathy: skills gaps, mindset and capacity.

*This research is adapted from [How to Build Manager Empathy](#), which helps HR leaders embrace a holistic strategy of manager development that addresses the three most common barriers to leading with empathy: skills gaps, mindset and capacity. The original article was adapted from [What Does It Mean to Be a Manager Today?](#) (Harvard Business Review).*

In the postpandemic world, many employees will work in a hybrid environment with more choices about where, when and how much they work. On average, HR leaders project that more than half (54%) of the workforce will work in a hybrid model once public health allows safe on-site work for most employees. <sup>1</sup> To operate successfully in a hybrid model, organizations must deliver radical flexibility – giving employees flexibility in not just when and where they work, but also with whom, on what, and how much they work. Our research shows radical flexibility increases the number of high performers in an organization by 40%. <sup>2</sup>

One of the underlying principles that drives employee performance in a hybrid world and provides a radically flexible work environment is empathy. Given the substantial and lasting shifts the workforce has undergone as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies must prioritize developing empathy in their managers. Managers who display high levels of empathy have three times the impact on their employees' performance than those who display low levels. <sup>1</sup>

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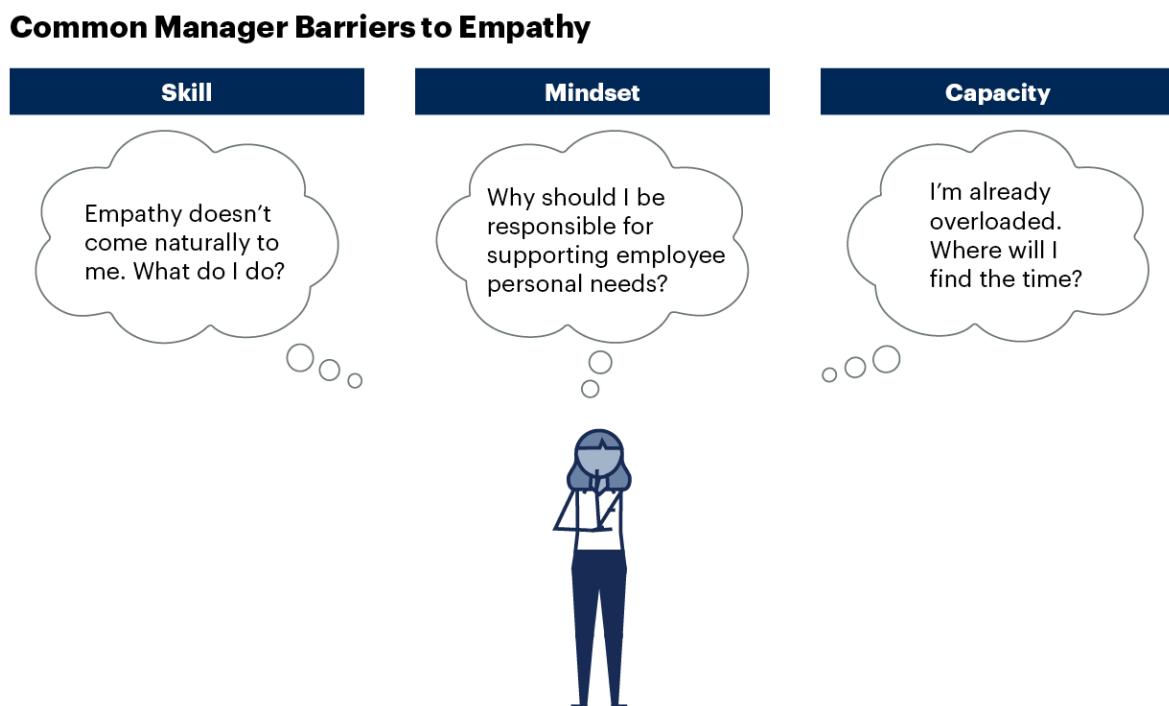
*The empathetic manager is someone who can contextualize employee performance and behavior – who transcends simply understanding the facts of work, proactively asks questions and seeks information to place themselves in their direct reports' contexts.*

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Empathy requires fostering high levels of trust and care and a culture of acceptance within teams. This is a lot to ask of any individual. Managers must ask questions that produce vulnerable answers without compromising trust, diagnose the root cause of an employee's behavior without making assumptions, and demonstrate the social-emotional intelligence necessary to imagine another's feelings. This is challenging enough for a single manager-employee relationship, and it becomes even more difficult as managers face the need to adapt to their team members' wide range of individual preferences and characteristics.

Empathy is nothing new. But despite its place in the conventional wisdom of effective leadership, it has yet to become a top priority for organizations. Managers have faced three common barriers to leading with empathy: skills gaps, mindset and capacity (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Common Manager Barriers to Empathy**



Source: Gartner  
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**Gartner**

Meeting the need for empathy requires investments in solutions to these three manager barriers. To overcome the barriers and enable managers to lead with empathy, executive leaders need to:

1. Guide managers to practice having vulnerable conversations.
2. Empower a new manager mindset by creating a network of support.
3. Create manager capacity for empathy by reprioritizing workstreams.

## 1. Guide Managers to Practice Having Vulnerable Conversations

Managers often understand empathy conceptually, but they struggle with questions about how to use it as a management tool. They may ask, “Are these questions too personal?” “How do I create a trusting relationship with my direct reports?” “How do I talk about social justice?” It goes against deeply ingrained assumptions that we should keep work and life separate. Managers need opportunities to practice – and, crucially, room to make mistakes – so they can learn to lead with empathy. Hence, executive leaders should work with HR and learning leaders to offer training and practice sessions where managers can learn from experts and each other within a safe-to-fail learning environment. Cisco’s managers’ “courageous conversations” practice offers an example of one such training initiative.

### Case in Point: Cisco’s Courageous Conversations Lab and Microaggression Conversations Lab



To build empathy, Cisco has managers practice “courageous conversations” with improvisational actors in its Leader Learning Labs. Labs offer managers safe-to-fail learning environments where they can build confidence in their ability to have vulnerable conversations with employees about relevant topics such as disrupted work-life boundaries, hybrid work uncertainty and anxiety about current events. Managers engage in multiple rounds of role-playing in which they are asked to react in the moment to challenging situations and to respond after an employee’s immediate concerns have been addressed. This practice builds manager empathy, especially by challenging managers to understand the perspectives of others. Importantly, these types of conversations offer managers the opportunity to fail in a safe space, which is rarely given to figures of authority. The actors who lead this role-playing also provide managers with unfiltered feedback rather than the anonymous or tailored feedback they often receive.

Executive leaders should also offer practical tools and tips to enable managers to understand the needs of employees and have empathetic interactions. Simple tools such as lists of questions can be powerfully effective (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Manager Questions to Develop Deeper Connections with Employees**

Goal	Empathetic Manager Approach	Questions
Build Trust	Mention some challenges they face as managers to create a safe space for vulnerability.	<i>These are the challenges I'm facing. What are yours?</i>
Understand the Employee Context	Gather inputs continuously through conversations about responsibilities of and difficulties faced by direct reports. Show interest in and act on inputs.	<i>What are your other responsibilities that are making it harder for you? What do you need right now to work at your best?</i>
Develop Solutions	Adopt a solution-oriented approach that involves the direct reports.	<i>What is controllable versus uncontrollable for you right now?</i>
Understand an Employee's Readiness	Reflect on the direct reports' interests and willingness to undertake challenging projects.	<i>What have you learned most from and enjoyed doing at the same time? What kinds of projects would you like to undertake in the near future?</i>

Source: Gartner

**2. Empower a New Manager Mindset by Creating a Network of Support**

Seventy-four percent of HR leaders agree managers should prioritize empathy over efficiency. <sup>1</sup> To empathize, managers must be able to situate employee performance within individual contexts and frequently beyond typical work boundaries. While HR leaders often recognize the importance of manager empathy, they are not always clear on what it means or how to use it. Hence, organizations struggle to effectively embed empathy within managers' workflows and their daily interactions with their teams.

Leading with empathy requires a mindset shift among managers. They need networks of support – leaders, peers, HR team – who have a clear understanding of ways to imbue empathy into day-to-day workflows. Executive leaders must invest in resources and the environment to support managers in their journey toward building empathy, especially in today’s challenging hybrid environment. For instance, Goodway created a dedicated role, the team success partner, to work with managers on fostering trust and psychological safety in their remote teams.

## Case in Point: Goodway Group’s Team Success Partners



Goodway Group, a fully remote company since 2007, knows distributed teams often struggle with

communication and shared visibility. Goodway created a

dedicated role, the team success partner, whose responsibilities include fostering trust and psychological safety and supporting team health. Managers work with team success partners to respond to the unique challenges distributed employees are facing. Together, managers and team success partners facilitate remote psychological safety conversations and support new team member assimilation. Managers’ motivation to be empathetic increases when they have a support system that makes it clear that the burden isn’t theirs alone. It also increases when organizations invest in roles designed to support them.

### 3. Create Manager Capacity for Empathy by Reprioritizing Workstreams

Managers are already overburdened by the demands of the evolving work environment, and actions that drive empathy require both adequate time and attention. While 68% of HR leaders agree managers are overwhelmed by their responsibilities, only 14% of organizations have redefined the manager role to reduce their responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> Making the need for deeper connections a part of the manager role and accordingly rationalizing their other projects and tasks can give managers time to build deep connections with their team members.

Executive leaders must communicate with their leadership teams and HR to review managers’ responsibilities and streamline workflows. These reviews should be carried out continuously, in addition to existing periodical checkpoints, based on managers’ inputs and their teams’ feedback.

We found the people team leaders had too much on their plates, so creating space to take some of that work off and to say “no” when needed allowed them to focus on managing their teams well, ensuring the well-being of their team by prioritizing one-on-ones, career development conversations and feedback.

— Nicki Bellington, head of talent programs, remote and onboarding, and Scott Hazard, vice president, global head of real estate and workplace experience, Atlassian

## Case in Point: Atlassian’s People-First Manager Prioritization Strategy



Recognizing its people team managers faced cognitive overload because of new demands in its distributed work environment, Atlassian made space for empathy by piloting an extreme approach to prioritization that gives managers permission to focus on well-being. The people team reviewed and deprioritized existing projects unless the team determined the projects were near completion, urgent or broadly impactful. When managers have a workload they can handle, they’re able to dedicate time to fostering deeper connections and responding with empathy.

Executive leaders who equip their leaders and managers to be empathetic by holistically addressing the three common barriers — skill, mindset and capacity — will achieve outsized returns on performance in the post-COVID-19 world.

## Recommended by the Authors

[The Future of Work Needs a New, Humanized Employment Deal](#)

[The Connector Manager Approach to Coaching](#)

[3 Ways to Redesign Knowledge Work for a Hybrid World With Human-Centric Design](#)

[Building Inclusive Leadership Behaviors: Beyond Bias Training](#)

[3 Actions to Sustain and Rebuild Employee Trust in a Hybrid Environment](#)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work HR Leader Survey, n = 75 HR Leaders from client organizations across all industries. Respondent organizations were based in ANZ (Australia and New Zealand), APAC (Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Thailand), EMEA (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Romania, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland and the U.K.), Latin America (Brazil, Mexico and Peru) and North America (the U.S. and Canada). The survey was administered as a web-based survey.

<sup>2</sup> 2021 Gartner EVP Employee Survey, n = 5,000 employees worldwide.

*The organizations profiled in this research are provided for illustrative purposes only and do not constitute an exhaustive list of examples in this field nor an endorsement by Gartner of the organizations or their offerings.*

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