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# The Foundations of Human Leadership

# Introduction

Over the years, I've had the chance to work with leaders from different industries and backgrounds. Whether in corporate boardrooms in New York, quiet retreats in the Swiss Alps, or coaching sessions in cities like Singapore and Mumbai, each experience has offered unique insights into the realities of leadership.

What stands out to me is how often leadership is misunderstood, even though it's a topic so widely explored and admired. Many leaders describe their role as a maze of expectations, shaped by long-held ideas about what leadership should be. They grapple with societal pressures, organizational demands, and their own doubts, often questioning their instincts as they try to navigate the rapidly changing demands of today's world.

This dynamic is critical to understanding how traditional expectations often clash with the reality of modern work environments. Traditionally, leadership was framed as a set of prescribed traits like confidence, authority, and a relentless focus on outcomes. These qualities were idealized, even codified, in organizational cultures. Leaders were expected to have all the answers. Yet, over time, it has become increasingly clear that these ideals often lead to burnout, disengagement, and missed opportunities for innovation and growth.

innovation and growth. One of the leaders I worked with—a dynamic, driven CEO of a fast-growing tech startup—confessed during a workshop that he often felt trapped by the need to appear invulnerable. "I have to be the one who knows it all," he

admitted, "even when I don't. It's exhausting." This is what I head mostly from other leaders I've had the chance to work with. It was a familiar mix of isolation, the fear of appearing vulnerable, and a nagging doubt that perhaps they were doing it all wrong.

Such doubts are grounded in the reality that the world today has evolved significantly from the one in which traditional leadership norms were first established. Millennials and Gen Z, who now form a substantial part of the workforce, are not merely a demographic shift—they represent a fundamental change in expectations and values. These younger generations prioritize authenticity over authority, collaboration over hierarchy, and purpose over profit. They demand leaders who reflect these ideals, often challenging the status quo and reshaping how leadership is defined.

One of the most striking shifts I have observed in recent years is the emphasis on connection, inclusivity, and shared purpose. Unlike earlier generations, who often adhered to top-down directives and formal hierarchies, Millennials and Gen Z seek leaders who engage on a human level. They value leaders who foster open dialogue, create environments where diverse perspectives are embraced, and demonstrate a genuine commitment to making a difference.

During a leadership workshop in London, a senior executive shared his struggle with managing his millennial team. "They don't just want to know what to do—they want to know why. And they're not afraid to tell me when they

think I'm wrong," he said, half-laughing, half-exasperated. His frustration was palpable, but so was his recognition that the old ways of leading were no longer sufficient.

What the younger employees are asking for isn't unreasonable—it's human. They want leaders who listen, who are willing to admit when they don't have all the answers, and who are committed to growth, both personal and professional. They want to feel seen and valued, not just as employees but as individuals.

This shift in expectations has been further accelerated by

the pandemic, which redefined the workplace and leadership itself. The crisis forced leaders to confront challenges they had never encountered before. It came with leading teams remotely, navigating unprecedented uncertainty, and balancing business continuity with employee well-being.

I recall a conversation with a leader in the early days of the pandemic. She was the head of a large retail organization, and her voice trembled as she spoke about the difficult decisions she had to make. "I've had to furlough employees who have been with us for years," she said. "But I also have a responsibility to keep the business afloat. It's heartbreaking."

The pandemic laid bare the need for a new kind of leadership, one that prioritizes empathy, adaptability, and resilience. Leaders who prospered during this time were those who embraced these qualities. They communicated openly with their teams, acknowledging the uncertainty and fear while providing a steadying presence. They made difficult decisions with transparency and compassion, earning the trust and respect of their employees even in the face of adversity.

While working with leaders and navigating these seismic shifts, I've reflected on my own beliefs about leadership. Early in my career, I too subscribed to many of the

traditional notions of leadership. I believed that leaders had to exude confidence at all times, that vulnerability was a weakness to be avoided, and that the ultimate measure of successful leadership was results alone. These beliefs were deeply ingrained.

However, these weren't isolated moments of realization—they were fueled by the stories I encountered, the lessons I learned, and the transformations I witnessed in the leaders I coached. Over time, I came to see how these traditional beliefs didn't just limit leaders—they constrained the potential of the teams and organizations they served.

This book is a product of that very journey. It's a deep dive into the myths that have historically shaped our understanding of leadership, and it aims to challenge those myths with new perspectives. As you read through these pages, I invite you to reflect on your own experiences with leadership. What myths have shaped your approach? What truths resonate with you? And how can we, together, redefine leadership for a world that urgently needs a more human-centered approach?

Leadership is more about creating impact than a fixed destination. It's about the lives you touch, the trust you build, and the spaces you create where people feel valued and inspired to bring their best selves forward. It's about staying true to your values and showing up, even when it's

hard. Because essentially, leadership isn't about being in charge; it's about taking care of those in your charge.

# 1 | Breaking the leader archetype

## Myth: Empathy is a Weakness in Leadership

Leadership has often been associated with emotional detachment and rationality, particularly in environments that emphasize toughness and decisiveness. This perception stems primarily from the belief that emotions cloud judgment and that empathy undermines authority. Such misconceptions have perpetuated the idea that empathy is a weakness rather than a strength.

Satya Nadella is another example of how empathy can drive organizational transformation. When he became CEO of Microsoft, he inherited a company plagued by internal competition, silos, and a stagnant culture.

Under his guidance, Microsoft has experienced a cultural shift emphasizing understanding and collaboration, leading to significant advancements in technology and business performance. Nadella believes that empathy is essential for innovation, enabling the creation of products and services that truly meet customer needs.

## The role of empathy in organizational success

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I think of Alan Mulally, former CEO of Ford, as an example of the power of empathy in leadership. When Mulally joined Ford, the company was on the brink of collapse. One of his first observations was a lack of alignment among the leadership team and a tendency to overlook internal conflicts rather than address them directly.

Mulally took a different approach. He prioritized teamwork and understanding, stepping into the role of a coach rather than an authoritarian figure. Acting as a bridge between teams and decision-making processes, he introduced his bold “One Ford” vision. At its core was the “One Team”

philosophy, which reimagined the organization as a lean, global enterprise united by a shared purpose. This strategy didn’t just revamp Ford’s operations; it transformed the corporate culture itself, moving it from division and discord to collaboration and cohesion.

What set Mulally apart was his emphasis on listening. He didn’t rely on issuing commands from the top but instead created an environment where voices across the

organization could be heard. By encouraging psychological safety, he promoted openness, enabling executives to share challenges and admit failures without fear of repercussions.

Mulally once shared, “When you create a psychologically safe environment, people will tell you the issues that need working on.” This insight was central to his leadership approach. He built trust, accountability, and a collective sense of purpose by listening without judgment and valuing diverse perspectives.

His 'working together' framework is also worth noting, as it places people at the heart of every decision. It shows empathy is embedded in leadership and it isn't just admirable—it's transformative. Satya Nadella is another example of how empathy can drive organizational transformation. When he became CEO of Microsoft, he inherited a company plagued by internal competition, silos, and a stagnant culture.

Under his guidance, Microsoft has experienced a cultural shift emphasizing understanding and collaboration, leading to significant advancements in technology and business performance. Nadella believes that empathy is essential for innovation, enabling the creation of products and services that truly meet customer needs.

He views empathy not as a "soft" skill but as a critical component of effective leadership, essential for understanding others' perspectives and building trust within teams.

Under Nadella's empathetic leadership, Microsoft's market value tripled, and its culture shifted from one of competition to one of collaboration and inclusivity. Employee engagement soared, and the company regained its reputation as a hub of creativity and innovation.

Angela Ahrendts is another leader to consider. The former CEO of Burberry, exemplifies how empathy can drive cultural and organizational transformation. At Burberry,

she revitalized the brand by fostering a culture that valued human connection and understanding. She emphasized the importance of empathy in leadership, stating that it is the greatest creator of energy. The company was struggling with a diluted brand identity and disengaged employees. Instead of focusing solely on cost-cutting or restructuring, Ahrendts prioritized connection. She listened to employees at all levels, seeking to understand their perspectives and their emotional connection to the brand. This approach led to a cultural shift within Burberry.

These examples clearly show that empathy in leadership is not merely an admirable trait but a strategic advantage. Leaders can drive profound cultural and operational transformations by valuing and understanding empathy's role within their organizations, leading to sustained success.

## Neuroscience

# Shaping Empathy

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Empathy is deeply rooted in neuroscience. It is embedded in our neurological framework with several components that contribute to how we understand and share the feelings of others.

Within the field of neuroscience, Mirror neurons were a discovery. They are a specific type of brain cell that gets activated when we perform any action and the same is being performed by someone else. These neurons offer insights into the human capacity for empathy. They also help us to mirror and understand the emotions and intentions of others, creating a biological basis for connection and understanding.

Additionally, regions of the brain such as the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex play a significant role in empathic processing as indicated by a research published in the journal *Brain*. Individuals with heightened

activity in these regions tend to be more adept at perceiving emotions and exhibiting compassionate behaviour. Leaders who enhance their empathy skills may effectively engage these brain areas, fostering deeper connections with their teams.

Research from the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai supports these findings, demonstrating that damage to the anterior insular cortex impairs both explicit and implicit empathetic pain processing.

It's essential to understand that empathy is not an innate trait reserved for a select few; it is a skill that can be cultivated.

## The Business Case for Empathy

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Empathy, now, has become more than an ethical imperative but rather a necessity for businesses. Research indicates that empathetic leadership enhances employee morale, fosters inclusivity, and drives innovation. A study by Ernst & Young found that 86% of employees believe empathetic leadership boosts morale, while 87% consider empathy essential for fostering an inclusive environment.

Furthermore, empathetic leaders are more adept at understanding and addressing the needs and concerns of their teams, leading to increased job satisfaction and performance. The Center for Creative Leadership highlights that empathetic leadership involves recognizing and relating to the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of others, thereby enhancing relationships and performance.

Incorporating empathy into leadership practices not only improves interpersonal relationships but also contributes to a positive organizational culture, ultimately impacting the bottom line. McKinsey & Company notes that building organizational culture is increasingly challenging, and empathy can make a significant difference in this regard.

### Cultivating Empathy as a Leadership Skill

Empathy is not a limited resource; it grows with practice, and small, intentional actions can make all the difference. One of the most impactful ways to cultivate empathy is through active listening. By focusing entirely on the speaker—without interrupting or immediately planning a response—I’ve found it’s possible to build stronger connections and create a culture of trust and collaboration.

Another useful practice is regularly checking in with team members about their well-being, not just their work. When leaders show genuine concern for both the personal and professional growth of their team, it strengthens loyalty and engagement. Incorporating mindfulness has also been valuable for me. It enhances self-awareness and emotional regulation, which, in turn, deepens the ability to connect with others meaningfully.

It's essential to understand that empathy is not an innate trait reserved for a select few; it is a skill that can be cultivated.

Empathy doesn't mean avoiding hard conversations or compromising on standards. It's about navigating challenges with honesty and openness, balancing compassion with accountability, and ensuring that every decision considers the human impact. For a world that is constantly evolving, empathy isn't a soft skill; it's a critical strength that empowers leaders to build resilient, adaptable, and high-performing teams.

### Five Key Takeaways

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- ♦ **Empathy is a Strength:** Empathy allows leaders to build trust, deepen connections, and foster collaboration.
- ♦ **Drives Innovation:** Psychological safety, fueled by empathy, encourages risk-taking and creativity.
- ♦ **Business Impact:** Empathetic leadership leads to better retention, engagement, and performance.
- ♦ **Cultivable Skill:** Empathy can be developed through active listening, mindfulness, and genuine care.
- ♦ **Strategic Advantage:** Empathy is a key ingredient for effective leadership in today's time, not just a valuable extra.

**'Empathy isn't a weakness in leadership; it's the strength that builds trust, deepens connections, and fosters an environment where people thrive. True leadership understands the human impact of every decision and leads with compassion and care.'**