EMPATHY: DE&I’S MISSING PIECE

EMPATHETIC WORKPLACES ENHANCE PRODUCTIVITY, EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

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With millions of job openings nationwide, employers are working around-the-clock to identify, recruit and train new talent while also striving to engage their current workforce. Empathy seems to be the key to success.

To understand how employees experience empathy in the workplace and how it impacts the bottom line, SHRM—the Society for Human Resource Management—surveyed nearly 2,500 U.S. workers. **Among the findings: more than 9 out of 10 believe empathy is essential for a healthy workplace culture.**
“Society is demanding organizations provide much more inclusive cultures. Research shows us that to move the DE&I needle, they need better leaders and people managers striving to create better workplaces.

**Empathy is a key lever in driving toxicity out of the organization by remaining open to other perspectives and fostering a climate where people can share transparently to move together forward.**

This means finding leaders who create strong cultures, motivate employees and understand diversity does not have to end in divisiveness.”

—Alex Alonso, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP, Chief Knowledge Officer, SHRM
Empathetic organizations promote positive workplace relationships; encourage collaboration; and foster diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I). People managers who empathize with workers are better leaders, while empathetic workers are naturally more welcoming of and able to cooperate with co-workers from various backgrounds. The most empathetic organizations are best positioned to recruit and retain the talent they need. SHRM’s research found that:

97% An overwhelming majority of workers (97%) believe empathy is an essential quality of a healthy workplace culture.

92% 92% say that when looking for a job, they will specifically look for organizations that demonstrate empathy.
Many workplaces fail to demonstrate the importance of empathy on a daily basis, which sows distrust at work:

- **32%** Nearly one-third of workers (32%) describe the current level of dysfunction in their workplace as moderately to extremely toxic.
- **39%** Over one-third of workers claim to have witnessed inconsiderate or insensitive treatment of a co-worker by a manager in the past year.
- **47%** Even more (47%) have witnessed inconsiderate or insensitive treatment of a co-worker by another co-worker.
- **51%** Over half of workers believe their organization’s leadership would lie to employees if it would benefit the business.
- **6.5x** Workers scoring their organization low in empathy are 6.5 times more likely to say their workplace is very or extremely toxic and dysfunctional, compared to those who score their organization high in empathy.

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When workplaces aren’t empathetic, workers do not feel comfortable voicing their opinions. Even worse, they may fear the consequences of stating their concerns, which exacerbates a dysfunctional, toxic workplace culture:

**More than one-quarter of respondents (27%)** say their workplace does not provide opportunities for employees to openly discuss issues without fear of penalty, punishment and retaliation, or they are unsure if their workplace provides those opportunities.

**Nearly one-third of employees (32%)** fear being disciplined or fired if they complain about mistreatment at work.

**Employees scoring their organization high in empathy** are more than 5 times as likely to believe their workplace provides a safe way to make a complaint about people managers without fear of penalty, punishment or retaliation, compared to those who score their organization low in empathy.
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR EMPATHY—AND DE&I

Empathy directly benefits the bottom line. Empathetic employers can gain a competitive advantage by attracting more talented workers, who are in turn more motivated at work. And empathy needs to start at the top:

Believe

The overwhelming majority of workers (88 percent) believe empathetic people managers are considered better supervisors by their employees.

Trust

Employees scoring their organization high in empathy are more than 4 times as likely to always trust what their supervisor tells them, compared to those who score their organization low in empathy.

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“There is a direct, bright line between empathetic workplaces and companies that do a good job with inclusion, equity and diversity. Empathy is what enables people to work cooperatively and effectively with others who have very different experiences, preferences, styles and opinions.”

—Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, President & CEO, SHRM
But empathy is also necessary down the corporate ladder:

- A vast majority of workers (78 percent) claim employees who demonstrate empathy at their organization are viewed as better overall performers.

Word spreads fast about empathetic workplaces:

- Workers scoring their organization high in empathy are 3.75 times more likely to recommend their workplace to someone looking for a job than those who score their organization low in empathy.
- They are also 3.25 times more likely to recommend family members, friends or colleagues to conduct business with their organization.

Perhaps most importantly, empathy and fulfillment are strongly linked:

- Employees scoring their organization high in empathy are 3 times more likely than those scoring their organization low in empathy to believe they have a meaningful career.

Low-empathy organizations often exhibit high rates of turnover:

- Employees scoring their organization low in empathy are more than twice as likely to have actively searched for a new job in the past 6 months than their counterparts in high-empathy organizations.

Organizations that fail to demonstrate empathy find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain much-needed talent. Low-empathy organizations also struggle to promote DE&I at work, ultimately becoming less attractive to workers from diverse backgrounds.
A CALL TO EMPATHETIC ACTION

There is more to promoting empathy—and DE&I—than paying lip service to the idea. To be considered diverse, inclusive and equitable, organizations need to take action.

Many organizations do not currently train people to behave more empathetically, presenting a valuable opportunity for employers:

50%  
Half of all workers say their workplace does not offer explicit training on empathy for all people managers, or they are unsure whether their organization provides such training.

21%  
More than one-fifth of employees (21 percent) say their organization does not demand inclusion.
With the help of HR, one of the best ways for organizations to promote empathy is by proactively training their workers—from C-suite executives and people managers to entry-level employees—to understand the nature of empathy and to behave more empathetically. Integrating empathy into workplace culture sets the right expectations for workers.

Beyond rhetoric, employers must put empathy into practice by showing employees how to build positive workplace relationships, encourage collaboration and foster DE&I in the workplace.

Doubling down on empathy may be uncharted territory for CHROs and other HR practitioners, but SHRM has the tools, resources and real-time data organizations need to take action. In the fall of 2021, additional benchmarking data will be made available for HR professionals to assess their organizations on empathy and compare themselves to the competition.

The organizations that make empathy a top priority—through action—will cultivate the healthiest and most attractive workplaces for people to achieve their full potential. In the process, empathetic organizations will boost the bottom line.
A sample of 2,496 U.S. workers were surveyed online from March 10 to April 5, 2021. Respondents were sourced from Lucid. Data was collected using quota sampling on gender, age, race, education, census region and industry, and was weighted to be representative of the U.S. working population. Data is reported for those expressing an opinion (agree/strongly agree, disagree/strongly disagree as applicable).
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