

A Blanchard Point of View

Leading with Empathy While Holding People Accountable



What's the most effective way to lead right now?



It's a vital question to ask, considering soaring burnout rates, distressing levels of disengagement, and the changing expectations of younger workers. It also demands a look at the command-and-control leadership style versus leading with empathy while holding people accountable.

Empathy and accountability are not contradictory but complementary. Being empathetic does not mean allowing people to neglect their responsibilities. It means using a balanced, kind, and fair leadership approach that benefits everyone. And it's built on the seven different tactics taught in **Leading with Empathy™**.

This POV takes a close look at this critical question and its vast implications.

Why Workers Need Empathetic Leaders Now

Workers are struggling.

Employee burnout rates are dangerously high. Surveys find that anywhere between **66%** and **82%** of workers are at risk for burnout.

The current political climate, the exponential increasing **rate of change**, a post-pandemic hangover that the National Institutes for Health **classified as a traumatic event**, RTO mandates, and economic uncertainty are key factors fueling the burnout epidemic. Another **survey** finds that overwhelming workloads, insufficient resources to do the work, and other job stressors are chief culprits.

Obviously, people can't do a good job if they're burned out. Disengagement, insomnia, anxiety, and depression are some of the psychological maladies. Physical symptoms include increased risk for type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Employee burnout exacts a steep price on a company. The **American Journal of Preventive Medicine** found that burnout costs employers anywhere from \$4,000 to \$21,000 per employee. Totaling the numbers up, a company with 1000 employees will spend at least \$5,000,000 a year on additional health costs.

The money lost to disengagement and missed opportunities is incalculable.



The Cost of Burnout

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Lots of Workplaces Led by Unempathetic Leaders

Unempathetic leaders are common in the workplace. Consider these facts:

- **37%** of CEOs believe that empathy has no place in the workplace
- **50%** of employees say their leader doesn't treat them with empathy
- **65%** of Gen-Zers feel their boss is not empathetic

Unempathetic leadership only exacerbates the struggles people are already facing and it does nothing to improve productivity, engagement, and other key metrics.

And a manager's actions cast a long shadow. They have as much influence with their direct reports as their **doctors, therapists, or spouses.**

"Managers have a disproportionate influence in determining how their employees experience work—and, by extension, how they experience their lives. Managers who are compassionate and caring can change everything for their people," shares Dr. Jay Campbell, co-creator, **Leading with Empathy.**



Lots of Workplaces Led by Unempathetic Leaders

If empathy is so important and unempathetic leadership doesn't work, why do leaders act this way? Blanchard put this question to 300 L&D professionals and leaders during a May 2025 webinar.

1. 53% say pressure to deliver results eclipses the need to connect

Consistently putting results above people is a broken leadership style. It makes people feel like cogs in a machine. This does nothing to improve productivity, loyalty, engagement, and retention. In fact, it does the reverse: It alienates people.

Successful leaders understand that having strong relationships with people naturally brings excellent results. People feel enthusiastic about working for an empathetic leader because they know they are in a partnership built on mutual trust and respect and want to repay the kindness that has been extended to them in times of need.

2. 47% say they're inexperienced or uncomfortable with emotional conversations

A lack of training and support is a common culprit, according to [Lyra](#). Then there is the empathy gap. Leaders think they are empathetic. Their people do not. Consider these facts:

- [55%](#) of CEOs think they lead with empathy, but only 28% of employees and 22% of HR agree
- [78%](#) of senior leaders say empathy is important, but only 47% think it is practiced at their company

Blanchard's [Leading with Empathy](#) training program helps leaders develop their empathy skills and learn how to use them wisely. And empathy is like a muscle: the more you practice, the stronger it gets.

3. 30% say they're afraid of seeming weak or unprofessional

This unhelpful belief is likely a holdover from the command-and-control era. As evidence, Blanchard's survey found that 22% act this way because "They're modeling the cold/transactional style of past bosses."

A command-and-control style has its place in emergency situations, but it does not develop people or instill commitment and loyalty. It is almost always inappropriate in the workplace. This [article](#) by Blanchard executives takes a closer look at it.

The Benefits of Empathetic Leadership

The Forbes article [“Empathy Is the Most Important Leadership Skill”](#) makes a compelling case for the importance of empathetic leaders.

And [according to Gallup:](#)

“When employees strongly agree their organization cares about their overall wellbeing, they are:

- *4.4 times as likely to be engaged at work*
- *7 times as likely to strongly agree they would recommend their organization*
- *73% less likely to feel burned out very often or always*
- *53% less likely to be watching for or actively seeking a new job”*

One last statistic to prove the point. When employees feel [cared for](#), they are [“92% more likely to feel engaged at work, 65% more likely to be loyal, and 56% more likely to be productive.”](#)



“Empathy is a non-negotiable for leaders, and the stakes are high for a leader who fails to embrace and model it. Dismissing empathy can result in negative consequences, including a toxic workplace, low morale, poor retention, and burnout.”

Dr. Palena Neale



Dr. Palena Neale, *Empathy Is a Non-Negotiable Leadership Skill. Here's How to Practice It.* Harvard Business Review Online, <https://hbr.org/2025/04/empathy-is-a-non-negotiable-leadership-skill-heres-how-to-practice-it>



Blending Empathy with Accountability

Many leaders believe empathy and accountability are in opposition. “It is impossible to do both. You act one way or the other,” is how the reasoning goes. But that is incorrect. We call this the “empathetic leader fallacy.”

Empathy and accountability are, in fact, complementary, and not contradictory. A leader helps their people thrive, and in return they bond with the leader and produce higher quality work.

“Being empathetic toward people and holding them accountable are not mutually exclusive. It doesn’t require you to switch between mindsets, make tough trade-offs, or exhaust yourself,” observes Dr. Jay Campbell. “It’s a comfortable place to lead from—and it can be a leader’s default position once you learn how to do it. But clearly, getting there isn’t intuitive.”

Blanchard’s [**Leading with Empathy**](#) program directly addresses this challenge. It teaches three mindsets that help prepare a leader from this position: curiosity, helpfulness, and self-awareness.

We take a closer look at curiosity to illustrate our point.

Curiosity means taking a sincere interest in understanding people’s feelings, goals, and experiences. It shows that you care about someone.



Blending Empathy with Accountability

But many leaders aren't curious about their people. A few facts paint the picture: Leaders do **most of the talking** during meetings, a **minority** of employees feel psychologically safe, and only **8%** of leaders are good listeners.

Many leaders would benefit from being more curious about their people—because empathy can only begin when you want to understand what another person is feeling.

Leaders can start being empathetic by asking simple questions such as:

- How are you doing?
- What's been on your mind lately?
- What feels particularly challenging or rewarding?
- Can you tell me about a recent experience at work that was meaningful to you?
- What are some personal or professional goals you're working toward right now?

The **Leading with Empathy** program also shares seven tactics that help leaders be empathetic while holding people accountable. These tactics are organized from the least intrusive to the most significant interventions. Leaders should choose the kindest and lightest response that will be effective, as taking more action than necessary can reduce accountability and undermine self-confidence.

Here are the first two of seven tactics that are supportive without lowering expectations or reducing accountability:

- **Acknowledge and Validate:** Validating someone's feelings can calm the mind, improve resilience, and inspire engagement.
- **Reassure and Encourage:** Support the person in distress by expressing confidence that they can meet the challenge and reminding them that they've successfully done something similar before.

"The seven responses are a ladder that empathetic leaders can use with their people. The further they go down the ladder, the more support they are providing," shares Dr. Campbell. "The key is to only go as far as needed. Overreacting conveys a lack of confidence, removes learning opportunities, and reduces autonomy. A good rule to follow is 'The lighter the touch, the better.'"

Rethinking Leadership

Leading with empathy is desperately needed now. And it will be even more important in the future. Give your people the skills to be the leaders people need with Blanchard's **Leading with Empathy**.

Also, consider working with a **Blanchard Coach**—an empathetic voice to support your efforts and hold you accountable for applying these skills on the job.





Blanchard® is a global leader in leadership development, consulting, and coaching. For more than 40 years, Blanchard has partnered with organizations to maximize individual achievement and organizational performance – bringing measurable progress and true transformation. Blanchard's SLII® is the global leadership model of choice, powering inspired leaders for more than 10,000 organizations worldwide. Blanchard also offers a suite of award-winning solutions through flexible delivery modalities to meet the specific needs of clients and learners.

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