



## Disruptive Empathy – A Must Have Future Ready Leadership Skill

Empathy is often seen as a “soft” skill, a nice-to-have interpersonal ability for leaders who want to create a positive work environment. It’s actually a hard skill because it’s much easier to teach someone a technical skill, such as planning, and a lot more difficult to teach someone how to lead a team from A to B.

There’s more than that, though. I suggest that we instead view empathy as a disruptive force that challenges the status quo, because it includes those who have been excluded. Disruptive empathy is about more than just understanding. It’s about challenging the power dynamics that marginalize certain voices and perspectives. It’s about reimagining existing systems and structures.

Disruptive empathy isn’t the kind of “empathy” throws away the past. If you are going change something, *you must honour the past that got you there*. Disruptive empathy listens to and aims to understand everyone because the change, the agreement, the buy-in happens in the mind of the other person and your goal is to get the other person take action on your ideas.

**Here are 5 leadership strategies to help you bring disruptive empathy to your team:**

# 1

**Actively seek out discomfort.** Instead of avoiding difficult conversations or uncomfortable situations, lean into them. Research shows that with all the turmoil on the planet, leaders will be required to use their conflict management skills more than ever in the workplace. Disruptive empathy requires leaders to confront their own biases and to listen to the experiences of others in the workplace, regardless of education, degrees, background, length of tenure, sexual orientation, culture or age.

# 2

**Prioritize vulnerability over invulnerability.** In traditional leadership models, vulnerability is often seen as a weakness to be avoided at all costs. Disruptive empathy flips this on its head. Leaders who are willing to show vulnerability are actually more authentic and relatable – and it takes more, not less, inner strength and security to show vulnerability. By sharing their own struggles and insecurities, and admitting when they’ve got it wrong, leaders create a culture where others feel safe to do the same. This fosters trust and connection within teams and organizations – which leads to enhanced productivity and performance.

3

**Challenge the notion of hierarchy within organizations.** By definition, most organizations are hierarchical, and traditional leadership structures are often characterized by top-down decision-making and often quite rigid power dynamics. However, empathetic leaders understand that true innovation requires a more collaborative approach. They empower their team members to take ownership of their work and encourage open communication and feedback at all levels, which means allowing disruptive ideas to be heard, regardless of job level in the organization. When leaders do this, it allows for greater creativity, innovation and adaptability in the face of change.

4

**Look beyond the walls of the organization.** Disruptive empathy challenges leaders to think about their impact on society as a whole. This means considering the social and environmental consequences of their decisions and taking responsibility for creating positive change, not only in their organization, but in their communities.

5

**Look beyond short-term gains and prioritize the well-being of people and the planet.** Sustainability is top of the agenda for many organizations – government, associations, not-for-profit, and businesses in all sectors. To work for what's best for everyone in the long and short term, you need to build your disruptive empathy muscles and work to have empathy with everyone regardless of their perspective. When you put people first, people step into the future confidently.

**Embracing disruptive empathy is not without its challenges.** Confronting our biases and beliefs can be not just uncomfortable but threatening. As leaders, we have to do this. It also requires a willingness to challenge the status quo respectfully and push back against resistance when you have ideas and strategies that you need to engage others on. Otherwise innovation won't occur.

Ensuring your boundaries are in place is a must. You can be empathetic without taking on the other person's problems or issues. Disruptive empathy doesn't mean you have to agree with the person. It means you can understand their issues.

Disruptive empathy is not just a nice-to-have attribute for leaders; it's a reimagining of what leadership can be. By embracing disruptive empathy, leaders can create organizations that are not only more innovative and adaptable but also more just and equitable – and future ready.

\*If you are interested the research about empathetic leadership and its impact on organizational effectiveness, [this is a great starting point:](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361952690_Empathy_in_Leadership_How_it_Enhance_s_Effectiveness)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361952690\\_Empathy\\_in\\_Leadership\\_How\\_it\\_Enhance\\_s\\_Effectiveness](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361952690_Empathy_in_Leadership_How_it_Enhance_s_Effectiveness)

*Gregg Brown has spoken on hundreds of stages and engaged thousands of individuals in some of the world's leading organizations to not only help them create possibility but to create change that matters in their life, organization and on the planet. More on Gregg's work can be found here: [www.BeChangeReady.com](http://www.BeChangeReady.com)*

