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Speaking to the Head and the Heart: Prioritizing Empathetic Communication in the Post-COVID Workplace

Kevin T. Caffrey

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Abstract

As of August 2022, COVID-19 continues to affect our daily lives in physical, psychological, and financial ways. Many vulnerable individuals are struggling to adapt to returning to work and as a result, employee morale is at risk. In times of crises, empathy is needed in the workplace to support one another, but many leaders and employees may not have a firm grasp of the concept. This paper seeks to define empathetic communication and explore the need for prioritizing empathy amidst the current post-COVID 19 workplace. Through a literature review of empathy, psychological safety in the workplace, and crisis leadership, the author explains how the development of empathetic communication must be intentional to achieve sustainable change and lead to long-term organizational success. Practical recommendations are provided on how organizations should define empathetic communication, provide training for leaders and employees, and incorporate empathetic communication as a standard of responsibility for every employee to be assessed on a regular basis.

Keywords: Empathy, communication, leadership, psychological safety, COVID-19, literature review

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Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, poor communication in the workplace was found to cause increased stress, decreased productivity, and low morale amongst employees (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Locker & Kienzler, 2015; Lucas, 2015; Porath, 2016). Amidst COVID-19, it is imperative that organizations cultivate work environments that establish physical as well as psychological safety to address employee well-being (Kulik, 2022). How leaders, supervisors, and fellow employees communicate with one another will directly impact and influence psychological safety in the workplace. Combined with the health and psychological stressors caused by the pandemic, poor communication now has the potential to create an organizational culture that may cause additional anxiety for employees that already feel vulnerable returning to the workplace.

Organizational culture materializes from the communication of its members, with Keyton (2011) defining it as "the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members" (p. 28). Communication in the workplace encompasses everything from texting and email, Zoom calls and in-person meetings, formal group work, and less formal cubicle and office conversations with co-workers (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Keyton, 2017). Shared beliefs in effective communication methods can be more challenging in the modern workplace as they continue to become more diverse than ever before.

Since 2000, the civilian labor force has seen the White majority decrease from 83% to 77% while Black, Hispanic, and other minority groups have and will continue to increase in representation in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Additionally, there are differences in communication preferences as well as perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate

communication behavior between different generations in the workplace (Janssen & Carradini, 2021). Individuals from generations and different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds often have divergent definitions of effective communication, not to mention the various ways that communication can be interpreted. Empathy, however, is a characteristic that can transcend our individual differences.

Nelson Mandela said "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." We know effective and successful communicators must be clear in their message, but communication skills are elevated when they come from a place of empathy. To communicate empathetically, an individual attempts to relay their message by taking into account the state of mind of the listener and the situation being addressed, and responding appropriately to the thoughts and feelings of the listener (Steed, 2019). In crisis leadership, leaders prioritize empathy and kindness in order to achieve organizational change (McClure, 2020). Developing and prioritizing empathetic communication in the post-COVID workplace is an opportunity for leaders to address vulnerable employees by attempting to speak to them in a way that reaches their heads as well as their hearts. Leaders can accomplish this if they take an empathetic approach to communication.

The purpose of this article is to explain why organizations need to develop and prioritize empathetic communication as a professional standard of employment. Through a review of the literature, I will outline the effectiveness of empathetic leaders, the importance of psychological safety in the workplace, and how principles of crisis leadership show us why empathetic communication is needed as we continue to learn how to navigate the sustained and continuing health and psychological threats and ramifications of COVID-19. I will also discuss the implications of organizational responses that lack empathy in post-COVID workplaces. Finally, I

will provide recommendations for organizations to ensure that empathetic communication is prioritized not only at the leadership-level but also at the individual-level.

Background and Significance

As of the writing of this paper, millions of people continue to contract COVID-19 and experience the loss of family members and loved ones to the virus. During the first week of August 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) reported a 7-Day moving average of over 100,000 new daily cases of COVID-19 and a 7-Day moving average of over 375 new deaths each day as a result of the virus. These new daily cases are much lower than the reported peak of over 800,000 new daily cases in January 2022, but still higher than the 7-Day moving average reported during other times during the pandemic such as from February through July 2021. As a result of vaccines, the 7-Day moving average of COVID-19 related deaths is thankfully much lower than most weeks since March 2020, but it still accounts for the deaths of over 2,500 individuals living in the United States each week. On August 8, 2022, the CDC reported 1,029,185 cumulative deaths from COVID-19 since February 2020.

Moreover, many individuals after contracting COVID-19 continue to deal with prolonged symptoms weeks and months after infection. Known as "long covid," the experience of continuing to feel symptoms such as fatigue, muscle pains, chest heaviness, memory loss, and difficulty with concentration weeks or months after contracting COVID-19 has caused scientists to believe the pandemic will have long-term societal effects even after cases continue to subside (Brüssow & Timmis, 2021). As mask use diminishes and social distancing guidelines are suspended, it has become easier for many Americans to forget that the pandemic is still among us. Yet research has shown that COVID-19 has affected different groups of individuals in different ways.

Financially, millions of Americans, especially marginalized populations such as Black and Latinx people, experienced unemployment, food and merchandise shortages, and closed businesses as result of COVID-19 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022). Research has also shown increases in substance abuse, depression, and anxiety levels among Americans since the onset of the pandemic (Das et al., 2022; Twenge & Joiner, 2020; Villanti et al., 2022). For others, the effect COVID-19 has had on their lives may amount to what can be considered minor lifestyle adjustments in comparison such as social distancing and mask mandates, inability to see friends, closures of restaurants and stores, and cancellations of concerts and sporting events.

Outside of our own immediate personal and professional lives during COVID-19, we have witnessed on a grander scale how poor communication about the virus can affect society in negative ways. The federal government's initial response, mishandling, and downplaying of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understated when examining the suffering that millions of Americans have experienced. In fall 2020, audio footage from the beginning of the pandemic the previous spring revealed former president Donald Trump admitted to downplaying the risk of COVID-19 to avoid creating a "panic" (National Public Radio [NPR], 2020). Trump as well as other conservative politicians also refused to encourage all individuals to follow CDC guidelines of masking to prevent the spread of infection. As Scoville et al. (2022) explained, this partisan disdain for following mask protocols and the rejection of acknowledging scientific evidence of the efficacy of masking was done to the detriment of public health and safety. In his work on resilience during COVID-19, Walsh (2020) stated: "the denial of the human tragedy of illness and deaths in the spread of COVID-19 by national authorities renders their suffering invisible" (p. 902). Comments like the aforementioned quote from Donald Trump exacerbated not only feelings of sadness and confusion, but also feelings of vulnerability and distrust.

Since the onset of COVID-19, America is at near record-lows of public trust in government (Robinson et al., 2021), and trust in science is also waning amidst the politicization of public health measures (Simmons-Duffin, 2021). Alarmingly, and something that may get overlooked when examining how our lives have changed since COVID-19, trust that Americans have in one another is also dropping, which presents a formidable challenge moving forward (Newport, 2021). Compounding these physical and psychological issues Americans are dealing with is the added stress America has experienced during COVID-19 involving some of the most heated social justice and civil rights issues since the 1960s, including the high-profile murders of George Floyd and other unarmed Black men at the hands of police officers, an increase in gun violence and mass shootings, and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court of the United States. During one of the most tumultuous times in modern American history, embracing and prioritizing empathy on the organizational and individual level is needed to provide the necessary collective support for the country's collective well-being. Since not all of our national leaders realize this, we can take steps in our daily professional lives to create workplace cultures that prioritize empathy.

Review of the Literature

Empathy

Empathy is a term that individuals sometimes struggle to define. Throughout the years, researchers have provided many different definitions of empathy, which has only added to the confusion. Hall and Schwartz (2019) explained that it is a subject that is central to research in health, psychology, and *ethology*, the study of the formation and evolution of human character. As a result of these wide-ranging studies and various definitions, there have been long standing concerns over the lack of clarity on the term (Cuff et al., 2016; Guthridge & Giummarra, 2021;

Hall & Schwartz, 2019). The American Psychological Association (2022) defines empathy as "understanding a person from [their] frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts" (para. 1). In their exhaustive study to identify high-level features and definitions of empathy contained in over 100 publications of peer-reviewed articles and books, Guthridge & Giummarra (2021) designed a meta-definition of empathy as "the ability to experience affective and cognitive states of another person, while maintaining a distinct self, in order to understand another" (p. 9). These, or slight variants, are likely the commonly held definitions of empathy of most Americans. Although empathy is often unfortunately confused with *sympathy* ("feelings of concern or compassion resulting from an awareness of the suffering or sorrow of another" [APA, 2022]). Understanding a person from their frame of reference is quite different from the simple awareness of someone's condition.

As Dr. Brené Brown explained: "Empathy fuels connection, sympathy drives disconnection" (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts [RSA], 2013, 0:16). With *sympathy*, we acknowledge someone's condition and share feelings of concern with them, but it often ends there, or worse, we may quickly and haphazardly attempt to make the individual feel better about their situation which can cause the individual to believe their feelings have not been validated (i.e. *"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, but it could be worse,"* or *"That's terrible. It reminds me of something similar that I experienced when…"*). Expressing *empathy* as opposed to *sympathy*, as Brown explained, is a "vulnerable choice" (RSA, 2013, 0:16) because to do so we must connect with something within ourselves that relates to what the other person may be feeling. Connecting with this relies on seeing things from the perspective of the other person and realizing that the individual likely does not want us to tell them "it could be worse" or

acknowledge the individual's feelings, but proceed to share feelings related to their own situation (*sympathy*).

Prior to COVID-19, the positive effects of empathic leadership was a growing area of interest to researchers (Johnson, 2021). Holt and Marques (2012) called empathy "an essential aspect of 21st century leadership" (p. 104). Amidst COVID-19, studies have shown that leading with empathy is necessary to support employees (Howe et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). Empathy has been an essential aspect of several relatively new leadership philosophies. Johnson (2021) discussed *servant leadership* as putting the needs of others first, and explained how *authentic leadership's* emphasis on self-awareness, balanced processing, moral perspective, and transparency can inspire feelings of hope and optimism in employees. Kock et al. (2019), however, felt that these leadership perspectives may not address how leaders engage with their employee's workplace emotions. As a result, they developed a model of *empathetic leadership* where focus is placed on how a leader can understand an employee's situation at work, invest in emotional understanding, and provide emotional security through their words and actions. Kock et al. explained "empathetic leadership proposes that leaders manage better when they have an understanding of a follower's emotional state, express their understanding, and support their follower's handling of these emotions" (p. 218).

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations engaged in empathic pro-employee communication, radically altering how and where employees could work (Howe et al., 2021). Mihalache and Mihalache (2022) found that COVID-19's impact on physical as well as psychological health, especially for those from marginalized and lower socio-economic backgrounds, will create workplace environments where employees will feel increased vulnerability. Walsh (2020) explained how COVID-19's personal impact on individuals and their

families will require empathic responses from others: "In traumatic experiences like a pandemic, when helplessness and confusion are common, we have an urgent need to turn to one another for support, comfort, and safety" (p. 900). Walsh also discussed how to acknowledge the grief and suffering of others is a strength that can foster the support and collective efforts of everyone to recover as best we can as a society from the psychological effects of COVID-19. Daniels et al. (2022) concluded: "To survive and thrive during and after a crisis, businesses must not only achieve desired organizational outcomes; they must also act responsibly to retain a capable workforce" (p. 209). Earlier research on empathetic leadership discussed the negative ramifications when leaders are unable to express empathy to their employees.

Poor leadership can have a significant negative impact on organizations as a whole as well as on the well-being of employees. Job-related well-being, however, has been linked to positive work-related results and outcomes (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022). Giambatista and Hoover (2018) found that leaders that lack empathy may express harmful workplace narcissistic tendencies such as disregarding the feelings of others, failing to consider the perspectives of others, and expressing distrust in others. Further, they may lack the motivation to assess and improve their behaviors and qualities as a leader (Giambatista & Hoover, 2018). Porath (2016) found that individuals are usually not uncivil towards due to maliciousness but rather due to ignorance. Yet, we are currently in a situation where organizations cannot afford to minimize the role of empathetic leaders. Daniels et al. (2022) explained that to survive and ultimately thrive during and after a crisis, organizations must "not only achieve desired organizational outcomes; they must also act responsibly to retain a capable workforce" (p. 209). In the age of COVID-19, empathic leaders and administrators will need to develop work environments that value the importance of effective communication in order to succeed. Prioritizing empathy in the

workplace will create psychologically safe environments for employees to succeed and thrive during one of the most vulnerable times American has experienced in many decades.

Psychological Safety

Along with growing research on empathy's influence on different leadership styles, there has also been an increase in research over the past several decades on psychological safety in the workplace. The original framework of psychological safety was developed in a study by William A. Kahn in 1990, where he found that individuals experienced psychological safety at work when they felt they were allowed to "show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career" (p. 708). To achieve this, Khan felt that organizations must create environments that are "nonthreatening, predictable, and consistent social situations" (p. 703). The foundation of a strong culture relies on building a safe environment for employees (Coyle, 2018). Within safe and supportive environments, the well-being of employees is prioritized and opportunities exist to be successful and thrive.

Edmondson and Lei (2014) found that there is a direct relationship between psychological safety and effective and improved performance in the workplace. In their research, they highlighted the fact that psychologically safe environments do not happen naturally, rather, organizations must intentionally design them. In a comprehensive quantitative study on psychological safety that collected information from over 22,000 individuals and nearly 5,000 groups, Frazier et al. (2017) discovered that psychological safety is positively related to, among other things, work engagement, task performance, information sharing, creativity, learning behavior, citizenship behavior, leader relations, satisfaction, and commitment. They highlighted that when individuals feel safe at work, they are more likely to remain at their current jobs. However, Edmondson and Lei (2014) stressed that organizations that prioritize and work to

create psychologically safe environments may experience an increase in irrelevant questions and comments. As a result, leaders must balance the encouragement of open communication with the ability to provide constructive feedback. This task appears to be a small consideration in light of the research on how psychologically safe environments improve employee performance.

When we reflect on the vulnerability of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can consider the data on the effectiveness of psychological safety at work in a new context. Research illustrates that psychological safety requires intentional design (Edmonson & Lei, 2014; Kahn, 1990; Porath, 2016). Recent literature suggests that amidst the COVID-19 crisis, leaders may have prioritized physical safety over psychological safety (Kulik, 2022). Kulik found that there is great potential in physically and psychologically safe work environments post-pandemic because if employees feel they will not be punished for their mistakes, they may begin to be more authentic about personal issues they may be dealing with. As we continue to move forward through the pandemic, leadership must reflect on the importance of empathy, psychological safety, and principles of crisis leadership to expand organizational culture accordingly.

COVID-19 and Crisis Leadership

As previously noted (CDC, 2022), while the number of daily COVID-19 cases and deaths is down from earlier points in the pandemic, they remain high enough to continue to affect millions of individuals. Mercedes Carnethon, professor and vice chair of preventive medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, explained that for those without resources and knowledge, COVID-19 remains "devastating and life-changing" (as cited in Abutaleb, 2022, para. 25). Vaccines have helped prevent thousands of deaths and relieved hospitals of being overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, but for the immunocompromised and

low socioeconomic status populations that may be without proper access to housing and medical

care, the pandemic is still a threat to their daily lives. Hence, leaders are not yet done with

leading employees through a crisis.

Leading through a crisis is not new. There have been many moments in our nation's

history that tested individuals to lead from a place of empathy. North et al. (2021) conducted a

study that examined workplace physical and psychological safety perceptions of employees that

had worked in the World Trade Center months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. One of their major

findings was that responsiveness to the needs of employees after a crisis by developing a positive

organizational culture that provides compassionate communication may assist with healing and

recovery. In their study on crisis leadership during the 2008 financial crisis, Stoker et al. (2019)

found that leaders may attempt to exert more control by becoming stricter and "tightening the

leash" (p. 209). They defined this as directive leadership where the expectation is that leaders

make all decisions that affect group activity and subordinates are expected to follow without

question. When we reflect on the unprecedented nature of COVID-19 for Americans, we realize

how potentially disastrous this approach could be not only on employee well-being but also long-

term organizational success. This directive leadership during a crisis goes against Stoker et al.'s

belief that leading during a crisis requires innovation and risk-taking as opposed to exerting more

control over followers.

Leaders need to develop a culture that encourages employee feedback and actively

engages and involves employees in the decision-making process (Daniels et al., 2022). By

listening to the concerns of employees, leaders can use the feedback to learn what their

employees need during a crisis (Howe et al., 2021). David Gergen, former presidential adviser to

four different presidents and founder of the Harvard Center for Leadership, explained that

today's leaders must be more adaptive than in the past and engage with followers and

collaborators to meet new challenges and demands (2022). With specific references to crises,

Gergen stated that we have reached a point in our history where they are "striking the world with

a force, frequency, and intensity most of us have never experienced before" (p. 203). COVID-19

has illustrated why collaboration and crisis leadership training must be implemented in

organizations. Stoker et al. (2019) concluded that organizations can incorporate training

programs to educate leaders on how to respond to a crisis. This training can hopefully include

highlighting the need for self-reflection and learning so behaviors can change depending on the

contextual demands of a crisis.

In recent literature on leading during the COVID-19 crisis, we have begun to observe

new paradigms of effective leadership. Mihalache and Mihalache (2022) explained that how an

organization chooses to support their employees during COVID-19 will have a major impact on

employee well-being and their feelings towards the organization. One of their key findings was

that those who feel less secure in their position or status at an organization may need

organizational support and supervisor accessibility more so than other individuals. Daniels et al.

(2022) agreed with this finding in their study on organizational support during COVID-19 by

explaining that leaders must recognize that the nature of support that employees need varies.

Additionally, Mihalche and Mihalche found that increased communication can also help

employees during uncertain situations that develop during a crisis. Since uncertainty is often a

key source of employee stress, it is essential that leaders prioritize clear and consistent

communication (Howe et al., 2021). Howe et al. (2021) explained that the efforts organizations

make to help improve employee morale and well-being can lead to increased employee

happiness and productivity. Daniels et al. (2022) believed that there is no singular approach to

worker support during a crisis. However, an organization's ability to prioritize communicating empathetically may lay the groundwork for leading in a workplace environment where COVID-19 is still a concern.

Implications

As workplaces continue to transition back to more normal circumstances compared to the early months of COVID-19, employees may feel more physically and emotionally vulnerable than they have felt at work prior to the pandemic. In many cases, their views and feelings about work have changed as a result of the physical, psychological, and social toll the pandemic has caused (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022). Since these changes vary from person to person, it may create situations that can lead to miscommunication among individuals.

For example, as Brüssow & Timmis (2021) explained, the continued use of masks beyond the recommended period may instill fear in some, while those who continue to show extreme caution may experience ridicule and hostility from others. A lack of empathy from organizations, leaders, and individual employees may exacerbate an already vulnerable workplace environment. Research shows that prior to and during COVID-19, empathy and effective communication are qualities that must be prioritized for employees, leaders, and organizations to thrive (Covey, 2020; Daniels et al., 2022; Holt & Marques, 2012; Howe et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021; Kock et al., 2019; Miller, 2014; Stoker et al., 2019). Presently, employees may need emotional support more than ever. Leaders can become empathetic managers when they validate their employee's experiences and show concern for their emotions (Kock et al., 2019). As work environments continue to become more stable post-COVID-19, now is the ideal time for leaders to recognize how important empathy and communication are to employee and organizational success.

Organizational response can address negative feelings, stimulate positive ones, and influence employee well-being during crisis situations (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022). What we have learned during prior crises and COVID-19 is that employees need to feel that their individual situations and feelings are understood by leadership. Yet, it would also be helpful for all employees to acknowledge one another's individual situations and feelings to truly cultivate a workplace climate that prioritizes empathetic communication. Relationships between peers at work have a tremendous impact on individual experiences and organizational culture, and communication is central to interpersonal relationships at work (Sias, 2014). In the next section of this paper, I will explain how organizations and leaders can instill empathetic communication as a necessary workplace standard of a post-COVID-19 landscape.

Insights and Recommendations

Empathetic communication in the workplace may look like different things, but it should always be an extension of the tenets of Kock et al.'s (2019) model of *empathetic leadership* involving the expression of understanding on an emotional level combined with creating a psychological safe space through words and actions. An employee that arrives late without notice must be spoken to in a way that seeks to understand the reason behind the transgression and assure the individual that they have the support of the organization. This does not mean that organizations simply allow employees to regularly disobey established policies or procedures but, rather, it combines empathy with execution. A supervisor's role in the above scenario may need to be to remind the individual of the policy on lateness, but it can be done in a manner where the employee feels that their supervisor is seeking to understand:

> *"Is everything okay? It's not like you to be late without calling. I understand some days it is a struggle to leave the house on time. Let me know if there is anything I should know*

about regarding your situation or if there is anything I can do to help. In the future, remember that you're expected to call the office if you know you are going to be late. I trust you will do that in the future."

Another example of empathetic communication could be expressed through regularly written communication via email. Often in the workplace we must respond in writing to someone that has made a mistake. It can be challenging if we have had a stressful day ourselves to respond in an empathetic manner. Yet, can we normalize the standard of first seeking to understand why the mistake has been made? Can we explain to the recipient and educate them on the ramifications of the mistake but at the same time show compassion and express support?

"Unfortunately, the deadline to submit this type of change was two weeks ago and to make the change now requires additional reviews that we may not be able to secure in time. I understand you are relatively new to the position and may not have realized the need for these changes to be received. In the future, if you believe you may not make the deadline, let me know as soon as possible so that I can assist if needed. Let me know if you have any questions. Hopefully this request will still be approved."

Consider the less empathetic alternative responses to the above scenarios (*"You have to text me or email me if you're going to be late." "The deadline was two weeks ago. It's going to be really hard to get this approved now."*). Even in the best of work environments, these indifferent types of responses can lower employee morale. In the post-COVID workplace, they diminish the fact that we are all still living amidst a crisis situation that may be impacting our performance.

After working for over 20 years for different organizations, I have experienced and observed how communication with a lack of empathy for the listener can be demoralizing. I have

been frustrated that even though "exceptional written and oral communication skills" will be contained in nearly any job position description, workplace communication steeped in terseness, apathy, and callousness is often accepted and overlooked. Yet it is these instances that contribute to organizational cultures where the feelings and well-being of employees is not being respected by other individuals. Whenever I receive an email or leave a meeting where an individual has exhibited communication skills that lack empathy for others, I wonder how beneficial it would be for there to be mandatory communication training for all employees each year to include the aforementioned findings of why empathetic communication is needed in the workplace. That seems like a pipe dream of the compassionate, but I hope that articles such as this one can provide leaders with insights into why all organizational cultures need to focus on nurturing empathy among its employees.

    As previously outlined, empathy is a subject that many find difficult to define and sometimes gets confused with the simpler character trait of sympathy (Cuff et al., 2016; Guthridge & Giummarra, 2021; Hall & Schwartz, 2019; RSA, 2013; Steed, 2019). Therefore, my first recommendation is for organizations to define empathetic communication within their employee handbooks. This definition can be embedded within broader statements on organizational standards and values, diversity, and inclusion, but it can also be created as its own area to highlight the prioritization of the expectation that all individuals must empathetically communicate with one another. Employees need to be encouraged to show empathy in the workplace (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). By officially adding empathetic communication to an organization's set of professional standards, it will hopefully lead to becoming part of the organizational culture. We must accept that not every organizational leader will lead by example even if empathetic communication is added to a company's official standards and values.

However, as Kock et al. (2019) found, to become an organization where co-workers give and receive empathetic support could act as a substitute for those situations where individual leaders may not be as empathetic. We are all in this together.

This leads me to my second recommendation: offer empathetic communication training for leaders and employees. To successfully implement organizational change, top leadership must be involved (Kuk et al., 2010; Bolles, 2018; Garcia, 2015; Cameron & Quinn, 2012). Whether it be a Fortune 500 CEO or a small public liberal arts college President, for top leadership to communicate the importance of empathetic communication as part of the organizational culture, it must be something more than words buried in a document. Simply including a statement on empathetic communication in an employee handbook will not ensure that it will be understood and enforced (Forti, 2012); the larger question is, how will leaders achieve the goal to have empathetic communication become part of the organization's culture and values? Younger prospective employees are interested in the way a company treats its employees. An organization's values, specifically those that focus on mental health and employee well-being, is one of the major incentives for the growing number of Gen Z professionals entering the workforce (Abril, 2022). Similar to how training is offered at companies on diversity and inclusion, sexual harassment, and security training, organizations should also provide empathetic communication training to its leaders and employees. Depending on the organization and available resources, this training can come from within the organization such as a Human Resource administrator, or from someone outside the organization who specializes in communication.

The final recommendation is to incorporate empathetic communication as a core responsibility on every employee work profile or job description. After defining empathetic

communication and providing training on how to communicate empathetically with others, there must be an assessment factor to ensure that employees follow these guidelines. Assessment is a necessary part of implementing organizational change (Bolles, 2018; Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Forti, 2012). By incorporating it into an employee's work profile, there will be an opportunity for supervisors and employees to discuss the subject and assess success during performance review sessions. This allows not only an opportunity for the employee to regularly formally recognize that expressing empathetic communication is an official responsibility, but it also reminds supervisors that this is part of the expectations they must set and review with their direct reports. This final recommendation completes a relatively simple three-prong approach to prioritizing empathetic communication in the workplace: define the term, provide training to assist leaders and employees, and establish a method to assess success in this area.

Conclusion

Positive workplace communication affects the psychological safety that is essential to employee productivity and strong morale. Empathy is a personality characteristic that can allow leaders and employees to understand the individual perspectives of their employees. If embraced as a requirement and expectation at the organizational and individual level, empathetic communication will increase the chances of creating psychological safety in the workplace, where employees feel they can express their feelings and concerns without fear of retribution.

As a result of living through a pandemic, where the physical and emotional effects have had and continue to have enormous ramifications for millions of people, empathy and psychological safety must be prioritized in workplaces more than ever before. Over the past several decades, there has been an increased focus on leadership models that adopt softer skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence. With a growingly diverse workforce, it is critical

that leaders possess the ability to respond to the different needs and challenges of individuals from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet it is also essential that fellow employees possess this ability as well so that interpersonal relationships in the workplace also support psychological safety. Since it is impossible to be aware of the specific needs of every individual, learning about empathy and practicing empathetic communication in the workplace can serve as the foundation for professional and personal growth.

When we learn how to respond to individuals from a place of empathy, we increase the chances of offering support to one another from a place of understanding. This understanding will help build the trust that individuals yearn for in a post-COVID society. In the present professional landscape, organizations, leaders, and individuals have the opportunity as well as the ethical responsibility to make empathetic communication a key aspect of organizational culture.

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