

## Article

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# Empathy in the Workplace: The role of Empathetic Leadership

The way we work at Waterstons has always been about building relationships and putting 'people first'. It's key to how we do business and how we provide the best possible service to our clients. But the last year has forced a change in the way we all work and brought about new challenges and considerations that'll have an effect for years to come. None of us know quite what the future of the workplace looks like, but what we do know is it's likely to change.



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For me, as the workplace changes the key is going to be around empathetic leadership. It's going to take those in more senior positions to make change, by listening and understanding the needs of their changing workforce.

Taking time to listen to employees who might be worried about the return to office strategy or the new parents who want to work during 'out of office' hours to suit their needs. It's about understanding how leaders can include and amplify the voices that need to be heard..

It's not just the pandemic that'll change the workplace. The Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 is a major turning point, with many companies giving an increased focus to diversity and inclusion. Facing that challenge will without a doubt require empathy and understanding from business leaders.

## My experience to date

For most of my career I've relied on building personal relationships but would I now be able to do this entirely via a screen? Without those casual chats and time spent getting to know people, I'm now left wondering if I'd be able to effectively work with my clients, especially the ones I'd never met in person.

And what about my team? When this all began, I directly managed a team of six. We all now find ourselves in our own little bubbles, with new team members starting remotely and again, we're not getting the chance to meet in person.

From the outset the key to me was empathy, being a little empathetic was the best way to build those interpersonal relationships whilst working remotely.

I've had conversations with clients about my postponed wedding, I've seen the art projects of colleagues' children thrust in front of the camera and I've had honest conversations with some of my team about how hard we're finding elements of lockdown.

We tried lots of little things as a team, we had remote coffee catch ups, some people worked odd hours around childcare or other commitments, and I now go for virtual walks on my one to ones instead of being tied to a desk, as so many of us hadn't got up yet that day.

They all seem small, but you realise they're all about trying to have some empathy for the person on the other end of the phone.

## **So, why & how to be an empathetic leader?**

Put simply, empathy is the ability to step into another person's shoes, understand and support them and to respond sensitively and with compassion in any given situation.

Good empathetic leadership gives us all kinds of advantages:

- Better understand needs of clients and co workers
- Deal with conflict and explain your point of view
- Helps our mental health and wellbeing (and that of others)
- Creates a no-fear culture where people can try new things and are allowed to fail
- Creates a cohesive, resilient team, and helps us to encourage and allow employees to thrive
- Promotes inclusivity and gives a voice to our teams
- Promotes honesty and transparency

But is it something that is considered important in the workplace? Is it something we practice, or try to help people improve?

Empathy is something that's developed over time, it's a continuous process and practice. It's like a muscle, if you don't use it, then you lose it. It's here that I believe the last year will have had such an effect on our ability to practice empathy, as we've stopped interacting with people in the same way. Out of necessity we've been checking in regularly with colleagues, and although better than nothing if it's scheduled it's forced empathy, and interaction via the screen doesn't replace in person interaction for most of us.

Empathy at its core is something we learn at a very young age. Before we use words, we can learn to read people, it's largely based on visual clues and sense of body language and demeanour. But once we only have a headshot or a voice at the end of a poor internet connection it's not the same, we can't read the cues.

So, what can we do?

There are some basic things that can help us practice empathy:

- Making a personal connection
- Being open and honest about your experiences, allowing others to open up.
- Practicing active listening

But a largely remote workforce and changes still to come, I believe there are three key things that demonstrate empathetic leadership:

1. Regular check-ins and dedicated time to catch up with colleagues. Not just for discussing work, make sure there's some social aspect.
2. Respecting that people will have different stresses and fears in these times. Everyone's experience is different. Don't look to minimise the fears or motivations of others, show some compassion and above all else a little patience.
3. Stress to everyone that it's ok to ask for help. Show people you're willing to help and encourage the sharing of problems and concerns.

## **But what about the future**

None of this goes away as we start to head towards the new normal. We're unlikely to all return to an office overnight. Many of us will want to keep some flexibility, and some just might have different needs. As some of us return to the office and others continue to work from home there's still going to be a lot to consider about how we build relationships and how we remain empathetic to people's different situations.

Waterstones have always tried to be flexible, to allow people to work from wherever they need to, to measure outcomes not presenteeism. We've always looked to put people first, it's the cornerstone of our culture. Building relationships with clients and colleagues has always been our primary goal, and for most of us that has always meant face to face meetings and interactions.

As the world opens back up, the future is exciting. There will come a time when people have settled into a new preferred routine and feel safe to be in an office, when we're free to travel and meet face to face without restrictions. We should also remember some of the positive from this period, we've gained a window into people's personal lives over this time, and maybe there's more of a focus on work life balance. Perhaps these insights will lead to a greater understanding of people's different circumstances.

I'm not saying I have the answers to what comes next, but I'm certain it'll take a lot of compassion and understanding from those of us in leadership positions to navigate our way to the future workplace. As we continue to think about:

- How we continue to build relationships and manage people if remote or hybrid working remains prevalent?
- How we continue to offer the same opportunities to remote workers.
- The role empathetic leadership plays in building a more diverse and inclusive workforce
- How we continue to care for the wellbeing of a remote workforce

So how about in your organisation? Is empathy a valued leadership quality, is it something you look for when recruiting, or try to train people in? Is it even something you think can be taught?

We've got a dedicated team of consultants who can help enable your future workplace. We're passionate about liberating people to work flexibly to suit their lifestyle. If you'd like to explore how we can help or just fancy a chat, take a look at our [future of work page](#) and get in touch.

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