

‘It can make leaders blind to what’s really happening.’ The Dark Side of Empathy



T

he journey of our lives is filled with ups and downs. Everyone you work with carries untold stories—triumphs, struggles, heartbreaks—that shape who they are. Empathy helps us bridge these gaps. It lets us feel with people, even when we don’t walk in their shoes. It’s why leaders lean on

empathy: It connects, comforts, and builds trust.

And yes, empathy is a powerful force. Through it, leaders give feedback that lands, navigate conflict without blowing things up, and inspire growth instead of fear. Done well, empathy makes people want to follow you—not because they have to, but because they want to.

But here’s the twist: Empathy has a dark side—bias.

Empathy feels pure, but it isn’t neutral. We don’t feel it equally toward everyone. It can be selective and personal in ways that are often invisible to us. In fact, empathy can cloud judgment, play favorites,

and quietly sabotage fairness in leadership. Worse, everyone else can see this—employees, peers, even clients—even as a leader remains blind to it.

Unchecked, empathy bias creates complacency. Some behaviors are excused while others are punished. Certain employees get free passes while others face scrutiny. Over time, this warps culture, damages morale, and drags down performance. What’s causing this? In some cases, insecurity is the issue: We don’t like our own weaknesses, and when we see them mirrored in someone else, we relax our standards. We justify the behavior and even normalize it, instead of challenging it. At other times, we feel threatened. People who aren’t like us can make us feel uncomfortable. Their style pushes us out of our comfort zone, so we push back hard. We label them “difficult” or “wrong,” and in doing so, make them the problem instead of confronting our own discomfort.

Finally, humans are wired to root for the underdog or the charming good guy. We instinctively want to protect them, even if their performance is lagging,

Empathy isn’t the magic bullet we sometimes make it out to be.

Meanwhile, the strong and capable are overlooked, undersupported, or even taken for granted.

When empathy goes sideways in the workplace, it often shows up in the form of passive leaders. These people empathize with employees who avoid conflict, because they avoid it too. They excuse dodging hard conversations and punish those who confront problems directly. The result? Issues fester. Gossip thrives. Problems are whispered about instead of solved.

It also shows up in active, high-energy leaders who excuse stress, chaos, and turnover as “the cost of getting things done.” These leaders empathize with impatient, outspoken employees who push hard. Meanwhile, employees who value stability are labeled as resistant or weak. Neither version is good leadership. In both cases, empathy is at work—but it’s misdirected, selective, and damaging.

Fortunately, there is a solution—and it isn’t less empathy. It’s *better* empathy.

In coaching, I help leaders spot their empathy blind spots. The goal is balance: Empathy can’t go only to the people who make us feel safe, validated,

or familiar. It has to be extended to everyone, especially those who challenge us and the organization to grow.

Directing empathy toward growth means supporting people through discomfort, not shielding them from it. It means encouraging accountability, rewarding resilience, and recognizing that friction can lead to progress. When empathy becomes about growth, it stops being a crutch and starts being a catalyst.

Empathy isn’t the magic bullet we sometimes make it out to be. Left unchecked, it can make leaders weak, unfair, and blind to what’s really happening. But when leaders harness empathy wisely, they elevate standards, challenge mediocrity, and build cultures where people thrive, not just survive.

And that’s where compassion comes in. As Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön writes, “Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals.” Leaders who embrace that truth use empathy not to play favorites, but to walk beside everyone equally—challenging, supporting, and growing together. ▀

Bentley is the founder and CEO of Liz Bentley Associates, a consulting firm focused on empowering leaders and their teams.