

The Moral Imperative of Empathy Leadership

AT THE CONCLUSION of a graduate course last fall on data collection for education leaders, my students concluded that if your data sources don't include empathy interviews of your most marginalized, troubled and unsuccessful students, your data teams are mining fool's gold. And they meant it.

These students entered the doctoral program at California State University at Fullerton because they are empathetic people. They are committed to the school's mission to deliver a leadership preparation focused on the tenets of just, equitable and inclusive education. This is leadership grounded in empathy, one of the emerging adjective leadership styles

that has captured the hearts and minds of education leaders.

Empathy has long been a trait of effective leaders and most of those who choose education as a profession.

Sense of Belonging

The COVID-19 experience exposed many leaders in public life as judgmental and unable to empathize with others. Research suggests these leaders lacked the ability and/or motivation to decenter, impeding genuine culture change in their organization.

The act of decentering prioritizes listening over hearing, reflecting over reacting and empathizing over judging. It's an expectation that I have for all members of my school district's leadership team. When we center only one narrative, we disable our ability to understand problems through a prism of multiple perspectives.

Empathetic leaders create safe and productive environments built on a shared vision for success and a strong sense of belonging. As Sebastian Junger wrote in his book *Tribe*, people have a strong instinct to belong. How do leaders build a strong sense of belonging among their students and staff or in their organization? They begin by deciphering competing voices and giving all voices the space to be heard without filtering those voices through a personal lens.

Related to student success, leaders committed to empathy recognize that students and staff alike need to feel a strong sense of competency and authenticity and a connection to others. The most marginalized students before COVID-19 now are the most vulnerable and affected children in schools, if they're even attending school (with chronic absenteeism at an all-time high). In their Annenberg Center report "Beyond Chronic Absenteeism: The Dynamics and Disparities of Class Absences

in Secondary School," Jing Liu and Monica Lee indicate many children have never "belonged" for a variety of reasons both internal and external to the school setting.

Reducing Negativity

The moral imperative of empathy leadership is rooted in a deep sense of responsibility to support academic achievement among all students, knowing all students are not created equal. It's well documented that adverse childhood experiences are negatively associated with success in school and in life. Empathetic leaders understand the impact of early adversity by creating a supportive organizational culture.

Empathy from everyone who touches that student's life reduces the negative impact of a child's home life. Empathetic leaders teach their staff members, and by extension their students, not to confuse empathy with non-academic behaviors. In fact, modeling empathy in the classroom improves academic achievement. Students who experience empathy are more than likely to demonstrate it.

Empathy leadership requires an empathetic mindset coupled with a tireless resistance to punitive practices that increase risks of cognitive, emotional and health-related problems. The latter only recently have shaped policies and legislation to combat institutional racism. Unmet social needs, environmental factors and barriers to accessing wellness resources contribute to negative behaviors we are experiencing in the classroom.

If you're an empathetic leader, you are purpose-driven. If you never give up on a child, a child will never give up on you.

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