

# Leading Teams with Empathy



# Agenda for Today

1. **What empathy is (and is *not*)**
2. **The basic neuroscience behind empathetic leadership**
3. **The business case for empathetic leadership**
4. **Key DEI implications of empathetic leadership**
5. **The importance of bilateral/360° empathy**
6. **How to prevent empathy from being misunderstood as weakness**
7. **Empathy Hacks: tangible tips for implementing empathetic leadership**

# 1

## What Empathy *IS*

- The ability to recognize, understand and relate to the thoughts and feelings of another
  - The ability to sense other peoples' emotions and thoughts
  - The ability to see things from another person's perspective
  - The ability to relate to – and care about – the suffering and pain of others
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# What empathy is when we don't approve of another's behavior

An understanding of the unique facts and circumstances in a person's life that contributed to their undesirable/unacceptable behavior

Where understanding is not possible, an openness or curiosity about such facts

**BEHAVIOR V. INTENT**

*“walking in another's shoes”  
v.  
“inquiring about another's footwear”*

# What Empathy is **NOT**

- Condonation, agreement or acquiescence of the underlying behavior

*E.g., poor performance or disrespectful actions*

- Lowering our standards of excellence



- Eliminating personal accountability
- Creating an “everything goes” environment

**JUDGMENT MINDSET:** If I subtly judge and disparage my team members when they perform, or question their commitment, they will improve their undesirable behavior.

*“This is unacceptable. You just can’t \_\_\_\_\_.”*

*“You seem unfocused or distracted lately. Like you don’t care enough. What’s going on?”*

*“You keep making the same mistakes and I don’t understand why.”*

*“I’ve noticed you struggled with X and Y. You need to pick up your game in this area.”*

**EMPATHY MINDSET:** If I demonstrate openness to and empathy for possible reasons for my team members’ undesirable behavior, while drawing clear boundaries about the behavior, I maximize the odds of improving their behavior.

*“I’d like to better understand \_\_\_\_\_.”*

*“You’re normally **so prompt** in replying to emails even when you are on multiple competing projects, which shows your **dedication** to the firm and **professionalism** as a lawyer. But you’ve been a bit delayed on this project. **Is everything ok?**”*

OR

*“Sometimes there are personal or emotional things going on in life that can **make us a bit distracted or unfocused** in our work. That may not be the case here, but if it is, please let me know **if I can support you** with whatever you’re dealing with.”*

*“I’ve noticed **repetition of the same mistakes** on this particular type of project. **I’d like to better understand the obstacles you’ve been facing** with this sort of project so I can support you in overcoming them.”*

*“Perhaps the way I have communicated my feedback in the past has been unclear or confusing to you. **What are your thoughts on this?**”*

**When a team member underperforms, disregards your guidance, or otherwise behaves poorly, how do you implement empathy without creating any condonation of the underlying behavior?**

# Assume Positive Intent

*(especially in ambiguous situations)*



**Indra Nooyi**  
Former CEO of PepsiCo

# Assume Positive Intent

*(especially in ambiguous situations)*

*“My father was an absolutely wonderful human being. From him I learned to **always assume positive intent**. Whatever anybody says or does, assume positive intent. **You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different.***

*When you assume negative intent, you're angry. If you take away that anger and assume positive intent, you will be amazed. **Your emotional quotient goes up because you are no longer almost random in your response.** You don't get defensive. You don't scream. **You are trying to understand and listen because at your basic core you are saying, 'Maybe they are saying something to me that I'm not hearing.'** So **'assume positive intent' has been a huge piece of advice for me.**”*

**Any thoughts on assuming  
positive intent?**

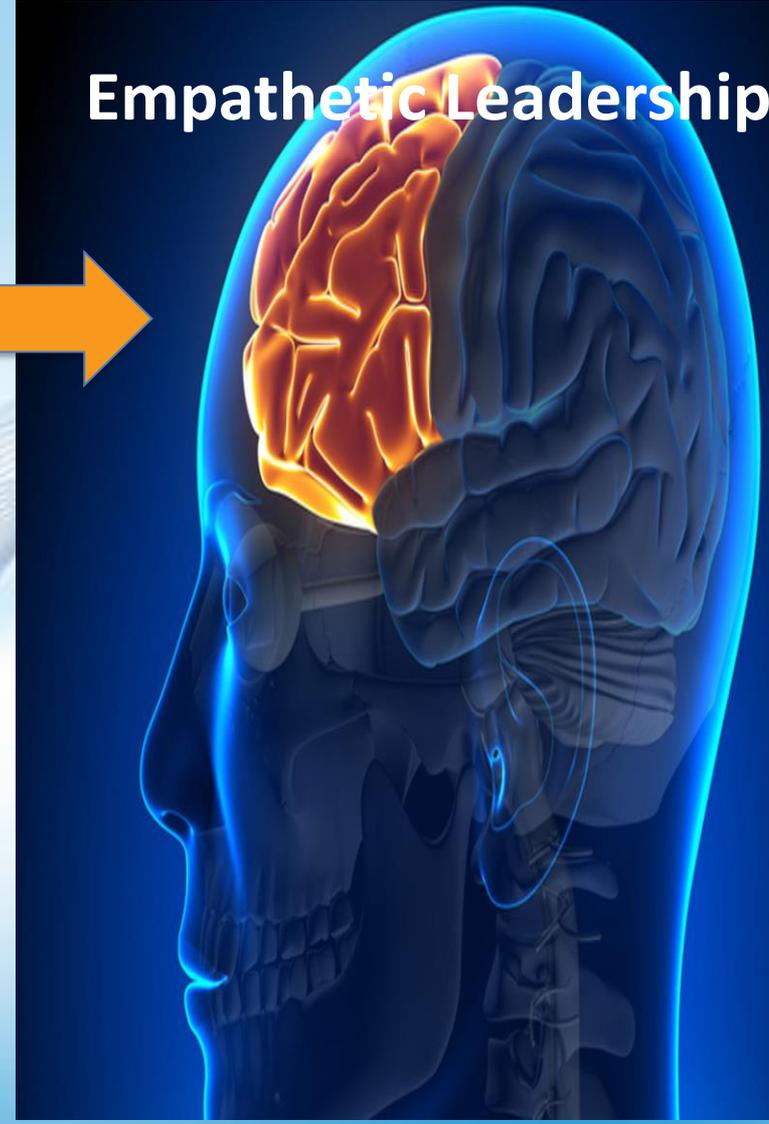
# 2

## The Basic Neuroscience Behind Empathetic Leadership

**Judgmental Leadership**

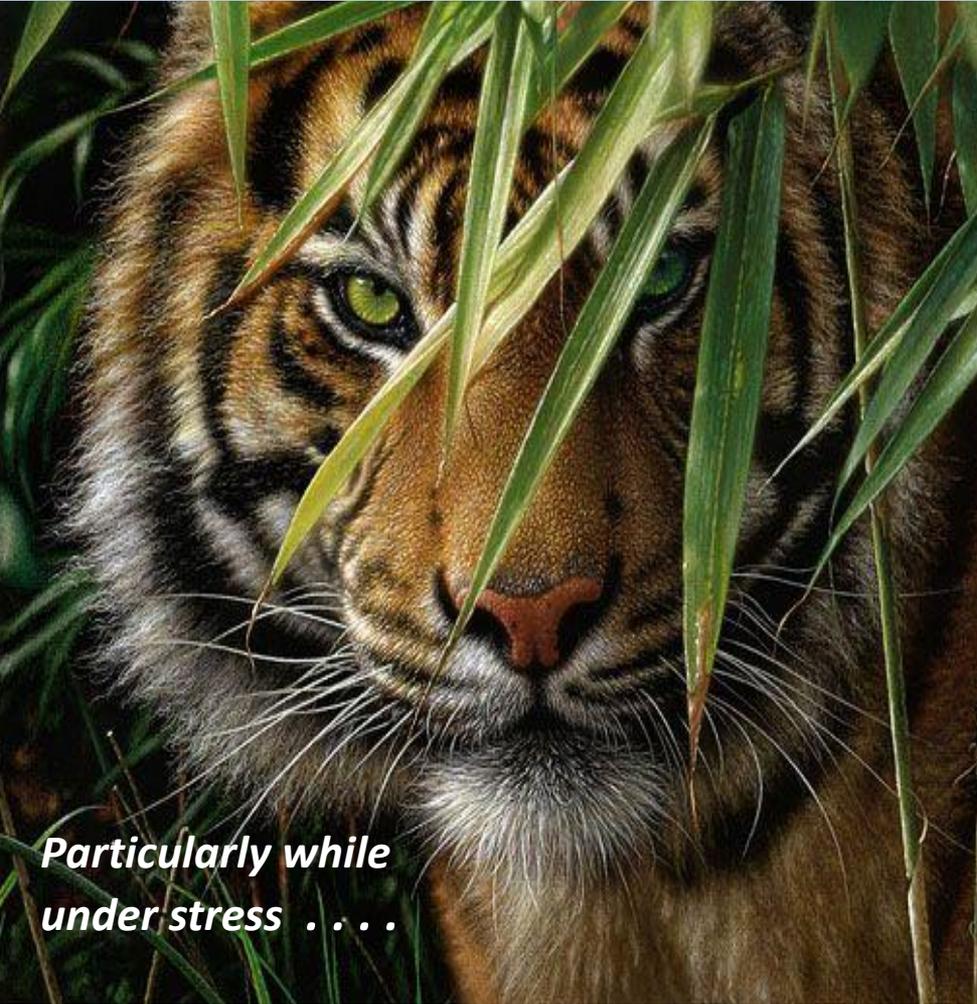


**Empathetic Leadership**



**WARNING:**

The Human Brain is Wired for *Maximizing Our Own Self-Interests* and *Judgment*



*Particularly while  
under stress . . . .*



*Cultivating empathy is a **skill** that requires **effort** to perform (& grow)*

When you apply **empathy v. judgment** in response to mistakes from team members, what effect, if any, does it have on **your own well-being and resilience?**

Any thoughts on **growing one's empathy over time as a leader?**

# 3

## The Business Case for Empathetic Leadership



Dr. Amy Edmonson, HBS

When you lead with empathy,  
what effect does it tend to have  
on the **professional performance**  
of your associates?

E.g., quality, effort,  
incorporation of feedback,  
accountability for errors,  
growth, etc.?

**Can you share an experience  
where your application of  
empathy to a colleague had a  
positive impact on their  
professional performance?**

**E.g., quality, effort,  
incorporation of feedback,  
accountability for errors,  
growth, etc.?**

# 4

## Key DEI Implications of Empathetic Leadership

Proactive empathy and humble curiosity are *even more critical* when working with *diverse* team members

Similarity Bias



Attribution Bias

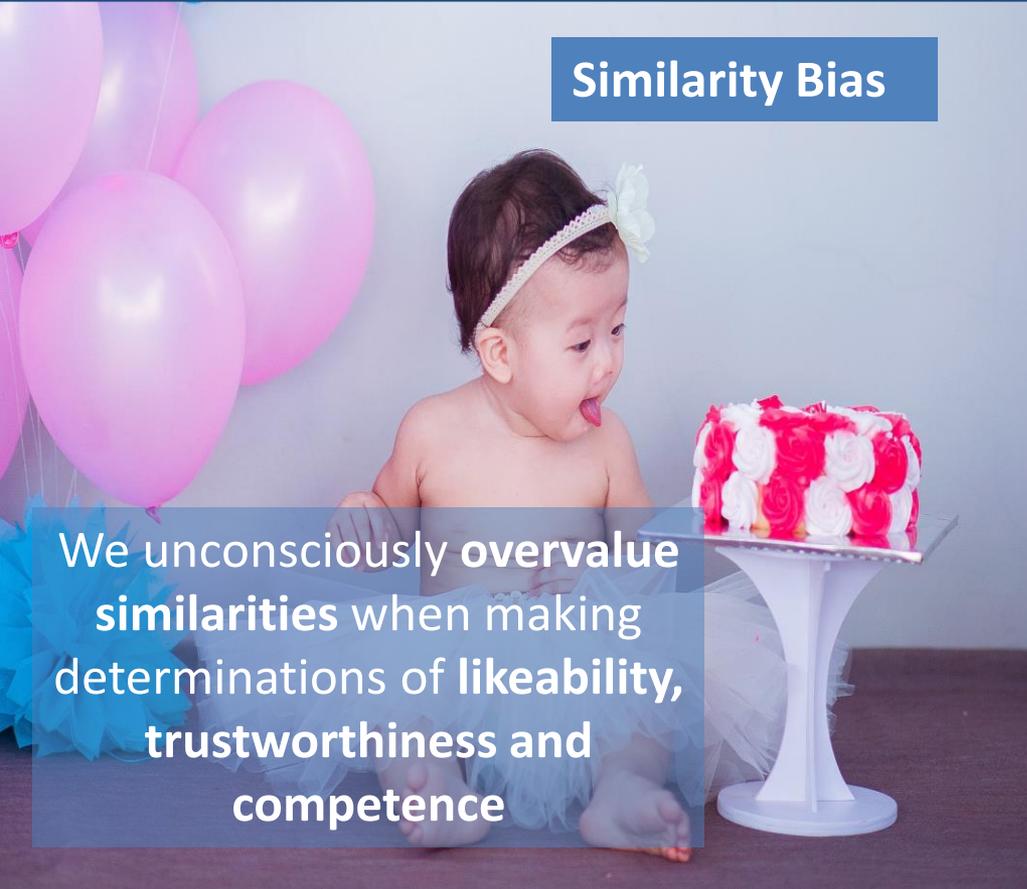


# 4

## Key DEI Implications of Empathetic Leadership

Proactive empathy and humble curiosity are *even more critical* when working with *diverse* team members

### Similarity Bias



We unconsciously **overvalue similarities** when making determinations of **likeability, trustworthiness and competence**

### Attribution Bias



We unconsciously attribute others' behavior to their character *as opposed to circumstances*

Any tips on how leaders can  
bring empathy specifically  
when working with diverse  
team members given implicit  
biases that may exist?

# 5

## The Importance of Bilateral / 360° Empathy

The duty of employees to practice "upward empathy"

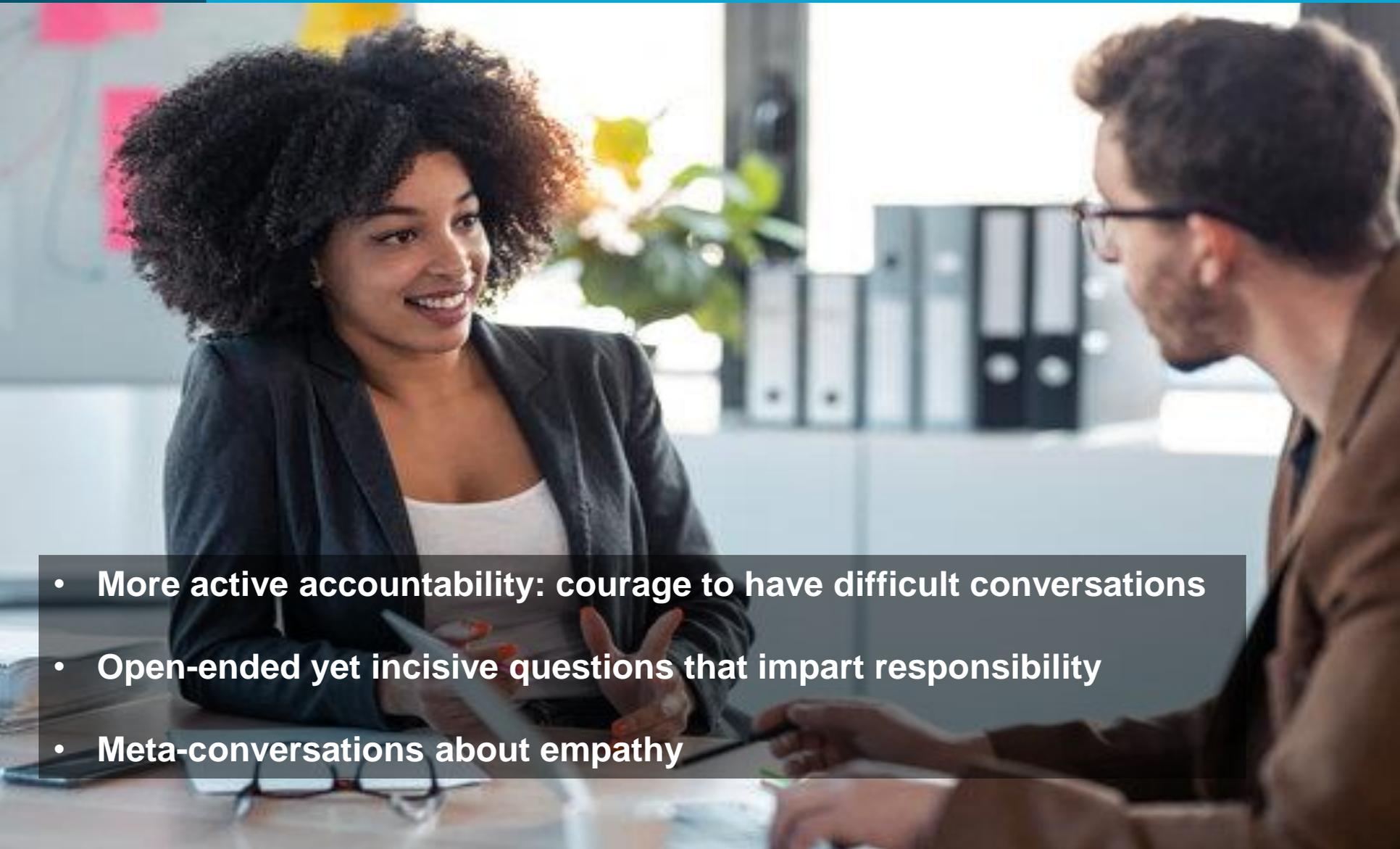
**How leaders can foster upward empathy:**

- proactive disclosure of leadership preferences/style
- vulnerability

**What do you do, or suggest doing, when you are extending empathy to a team member but they are not reciprocating that empathy?**

# 6

## How to Prevent Empathy from Being Misunderstood as Weakness

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- A woman with curly hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white top, is smiling and talking to a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a brown jacket. They are sitting at a desk in an office setting. The background shows a whiteboard with colorful sticky notes, a potted plant, and several binders on a shelf.
- **More active accountability: courage to have difficult conversations**
  - **Open-ended yet incisive questions that impart responsibility**
  - **Meta-conversations about empathy**

**Any suggestions for how to deliver empathy while reducing the likelihood of it being misinterpreted as weakness?**

**As female leaders, is there a greater risk that your empathy will be exploited / will backfire? If so, any suggestions on how to navigate this?**

# 7

## Empathy Hacks: Tangible Tips For Implementing Empathetic Leadership

1. Ask more questions, make less statements. *[Especially when you are frustrated or are certain about something]*
2. “That’s Me Too” Technique: attempt to find the closest or most analogous situation where you have been in their shoes
3. Overtly raise – and inquire about – your own potential contribution/role in their behavior

# 7

## Empathy Hacks: Tangible Tips For Implementing Empathetic Leadership

4. Preface tough feedback with an explanation of why it's being provided: "Please understand that this feedback is being offered to help you continue to advance in your development as a litigator."
5. Inquiring about potential external impacts on an attorneys performance: Request a 1:1 check in chat and ask: "How are you [personally/professionally]?"
6. Lead with positive attributes of your colleagues performance and offer to brainstorm effective ways to address potentially poor behavior. "I truly enjoy working with you and am generally pleased with your [insert positives (e.g., responsiveness, effective communication skills, research accuracy)]. Lately, I noticed [insert behavior that needs to be addressed] and I wanted to check in with you about strategies for addressing it."

# 7

## Empathy Hacks: Tangible Tips For Implementing Empathetic Leadership

7. Making clear that you are a resource throughout the assignment if needed
8. Being clear about expectations at the beginning so there is no confusion about what is an is not a mistake/underperformance
9. Creating space for the colleague to share with you other things that are going on in their life that might impact their work

*“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”*

~ Atticus Finch  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)



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