2020 STATE OF WORKPLACE EMPATHY℠

SPECIAL REPORT

Workplace Empathy:
What Leaders Don't Know Can Hurt Them

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Five years of data from the Businessolver® State of Workplace Empathy Study℠ demonstrates the impact and increasing importance of empathetic leaders. Now is the time for leaders, and especially executives, to proactively address the empathy blind spots in their organizations.

As organizations adapt to massive and unprecedented change from the global pandemic and whiplash economy, their leaders find themselves subject to heightened scrutiny for their responses to the human and financial costs of our current landscape. Data from Businessolver's **2020 State of Workplace Empathy Study** underscores leaders' unique position going forward: Chief Executive Officers must play a dual role, serving as CEO AND Chief Empathy Officer.

Empathy's value in the workplace has risen over the years, but progress has stalled. A significant disconnect persists between how executives view workplace empathy and how employees experience it.
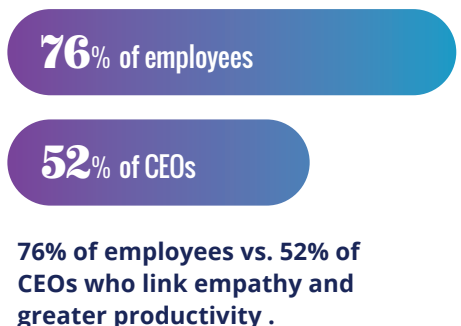
▶ Only **48%** of employees believe companies as a whole are empathetic, versus **68%** of CEOs.

▶ **91%** of CEOs say their company is empathetic, but only 68% of employees agree.

▶ Only **45%** of employees view CEOs in general as empathetic, versus **87%** of CEOs; **63%** of employees say their own CEOs are empathetic.

Employees want open, direct lines of communication around mental well-being; organizations aren't doing enough. With workers facing extreme uncertainty over physical health, job security and more, anxiety and mental health issues demand attention from leaders, especially CEOs.

▶ **86%** of CEOs think their organization is openly discussing mental health, versus **58%** of employees.

▶ **92%** of employees say companies should do more for the overall well-being and needs of their workers.

▶ **96%** of employees believe mental health is as important as physical health, yet over three-quarters **(76%)** say employers view someone with a mental health issue as a burden.

Leaders often underestimate or risk missing out on empathy's impact on their organization to succeed or recover. Today's employees see empathy as a key driver of their productivity.

▶ **76%** of employees believe an organization's empathy drives productivity; only **52%** of CEOs agree.

▶ **70%** of employees credit higher empathy for driving lower turnover rates; only **40%** of CEOs do.

▶ Just over **50%** of CEOs agreed that empathy inspired productivity and motivation, however, **82%** believe a company's financial performance is tied to empathy which calls out the disconnect related to the impact of workplace empathy.

68% of CEOs

48% of employees

68% of CEOs believe companies are empathetic, compared to 48% of employees.

92%

of employees say companies should do more for the overall well-being and needs of their workers.

76% of employees

52% of CEOs

76% of employees vs. 52% of CEOs who link empathy and greater productivity .

Survey respondents in the C-suite and across roles and job titles are all calling for change. **Now is the time to resolve the disconnect between how executives envision workplace empathy and how their employees actually experience it — but where can leaders start?**

Develop policies and practices that open lines of communication directly to leadership. Employees are asking for "face-to-face" time with leadership, and executives need to create these opportunities to listen to employees' concerns, including in a virtual format during periods of distancing and in remote work environments.

Consider cross-generational empathy training, as more employees today believe that empathy can be learned. Employees at different life stages experience unique challenges in the current strained and uncertain work environment. Learned empathy across generations can boost productivity and employees' overall perception of their workplace. In the recent survey, 73% of employees said that empathy can be learned, versus 65% in 2017.

Explore benefits, clarify policies and encourage behaviors that promote work-life flexibility. Today, a successful company culture needs to reflect employees' need to honor their lives and families outside of work. Flexibility is highly and frequently cited by employees as contributing to better overall mental well-being. Although some benefits could be falling short, employees may also misperceive offerings such as comp time that are often vague and easily misunderstood. CEOs can help bridge the gap between policy and culture to ensure that benefits meet the needs of the whole individual.

Empower change agents across the organization. CEOs and employees are divided on who is responsible for improving workplace empathy. On average, employees look to their manager as drivers of empathy. CEOs must set the tone for empathy from the top and encourage managers to carry that message through the organization. With many working remotely or in high-stress roles, it is up to CEOs to model empathetic actions for managers across the leadership spectrum.

Support employee mental health. No one has cracked the code on de-stigmatizing mental health. Employees and CEOs alike agree that organizations should be doing more, yet both groups fear they will be viewed as a burden for coming forward with issues. Reflection and honest conversations that start at the top can begin to dismantle stigma and deepen empathy throughout the organization.

To impact the kind of change that employees are asking for — and expect — executives must act. Beyond one conversation, one program or training, CEOs and organizational leaders must focus on continuous listening and learning in order to transform the state of empathy in their workplace.

LEARN MORE

Businessolver has been collecting data and reporting on the topic of workplace empathy since 2016. Visit businessolver.com/empathy to learn more.

The Businessolver State of Workplace Empathy Study was conducted in February 2020 and surveyed 1,950 employees, CEOS and HR professionals across sectors.