

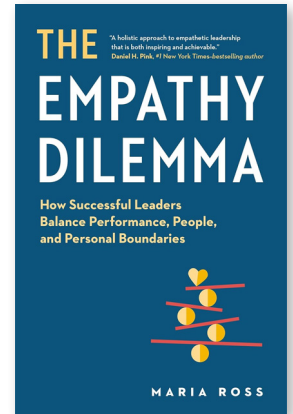


Executive Book Summaries[®]

The Empathy Dilemma

How Successful Leaders Balance Performance, People, and Personal Boundaries

by **Maria Ross**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In today's post-pandemic workplace, leaders face a paradox: employees expect understanding and flexibility, yet organizations still demand results. Many well-intentioned executives are discovering that unchecked empathy can lead to blurred boundaries, burnout, and declining productivity. So how can you lead with compassion without compromising high performance or financial success?

The Empathy Dilemma: How Successful Leaders Balance Performance, People, and Personal Boundaries answers that question with a compact, practical framework for leaders. The book explains that unchecked empathy can blur boundaries, dilute accountability, and erode productivity—and reframes empathy as a practical, actionable skill grounded in five core pillars.

Drawing on extensive research and interviews, Maria Ross shows how to translate compassionate intent into repeatable outcomes: measure and manage emotional labor, set clear expectations, protect leader resilience, and sustain organizational performance. She stresses that empathy must be reciprocal, built on mutual respect and trust, and that leaders who master the five pillars can preserve both well-being and results.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Balance empathy and performance by converting compassionate policies into measurable practices
- Use reflection and data to identify bias, fatigue, and leadership blind spots
- Institutionalize leader resilience to prevent burnout and model healthy behavior
- Create a trust-based relationship with employees and a safe and reliable environment where everyone can thrive

Introduction

All across the globe, organizations are becoming more human-centric. They've jettisoned old paradigms of success that center on endless overtime and constant employee sacrifice. They've tied success to purpose and workforce morale, and they've helped people balance personal and professional needs as their priorities change.

With those shifts have come changes in workplace culture, benefits offerings, even job duties. And when those social shifts collide with accelerants like the COVID-19 pandemic, employee expectations begin to morph. Compassionate policies that were once actively appreciated become taken for granted. Leniency is expected instead of requested. Workers feel entitled to special treatment at all times and under all circumstances.

And because of this, business leaders are starting to see the dark side of empathy.

In some cases, people-focused work policies have skewed employee expectations. Workers across industries now resist workplace citizenship behaviors: they refuse to stay late, show up early, or attend non-mandatory meetings. In response, leaders and fully engaged workers must do more, work more, and facilitate more just to keep their companies moving forward.

Empathy has been weaponized. Employers who commit to building compassionate workplaces feel like they must say yes to every employee request or risk watching helplessly as more people embrace "quiet quitting." How can leaders hold people accountable and set high expectations without being treated like villains? Is the answer to turn back the clock and reinstate iron-fist bossism?

In a word: *no*.

Empathy is not about caving in to unrealistic demands, letting workers do whatever they want to do, or accepting slipping performance. It's about listening, getting curious, sitting with someone's struggle or perspective, and finding a way forward.

Empathy is more about mutual understanding and support than it is about acquiescence.

Leaders who adopt healthy empathetic habits with their teams can still expect high performance, set boundaries, and avoid burnout. They can do so if they have the right foundation to embrace empathy in a healthy way.

Part I: Why Workplace Empathy Feels Hard

Chapter 1: What Is Empathy in a Work Context?

Empathy is a critically important concept in modern life, but it's also a nuanced and complex one. And one that, unfortunately, many leaders get wrong.

If you look at the definition of empathy over time, it has changed dramatically from the 1700s to today. I believe the wide variety of conflicting and convoluted ideas about the concept are contributing to the escalating tensions between leaders and their teams.

After hundreds of interviews, talks, and hours of research, the definition I want to propose to you and invite you to embrace in an organizational context is this: empathy is being willing and able to see, understand, and (where appropriate) feel another person's perspective and to use that information to act compassionately.

This definition also reflects the two types of empathy that people commonly experience:

- Cognitive empathy – uses your brain first, before your heart gets involved.
- Emotional empathy – feeling, echoing, or mirroring the emotions that someone else is feeling. It's empathy using your heart.

Examining Empathy Myths

Empathy Myth 1: Empathy means "being nice"

Not so! There are lots of nice people in our workplaces. That doesn't mean they see things from our point of view or connect with us emotionally. Creating an empathetic culture means more than just hiring a bunch of really nice people.

Empathy Myth 2: Empathy means caving in to any and all demands

Thankfully, no. Caving in to unreasonable demands is often the opposite of empathy. We need to remember that you can see someone's point of view and understand their context and still make a tough business decision that might negatively affect them, like a layoff or reorg.

Empathy Myth 3: Empathy runs in a single direction from leaders to workers

Are leaders the only ones who need to learn and express empathy for their staff? Absolutely not. Strengthening empathy is everyone's job, and it must be modeled and supported.

Empathy is being willing and able to see, understand, and—where appropriate—feel another person’s perspective and to use that information to act compassionately.

Empathy Myth 4: Empathy means agreement

Especially in work situations, this isn’t always the case. You can have empathy for someone and also have a productive dialogue about the points on which you disagree.

Chapter 2: Where We Go Wrong with Workplace Empathy

Power hierarchies are inherent to corporate culture, but many leaders have become increasingly uncomfortable with them. They know that team members may resent or disdain these rankings of influence, so leaders attempt to downplay their standing. This often manifests as attempts at camaraderie.

This can be dangerous territory and often leads to “empathy hijacking.” In a well-intentioned effort to connect, we listen to someone else’s plight and then share our own related story. It’s our attempt at active listening, and our intention is to make others not feel so alone. But in doing so, we’ve hijacked the thread. We’ve made it about us, not them.

There’s a time and place to share learnings from our experiences, but even when that time comes, we must do so only with explicit consent. I recommend saying something like, “Would it help if I shared something similar from my own experience?” The person you’re speaking with may say yes or no, and you must respect their response.

When Empathy Gets in the Way

There are times when leaders need to dial back their emotional empathy so they can steward the health of the overall business. Obviously, we want to show compassion for our employees as often as we can and across many scenarios—but not always at the expense of the company.

Weaponized Empathy

Weaponized empathy can cause agony for truly empathetic business leaders. They understand their team members’ logic and want to ensure everyone feels heard and valued, but they also know that business needs must be met. They have their own higher-ups to answer to, and if those higher-

ups insist that everyone needs to get back to their cubicles, they are expected to make that happen.

Unfortunately, weaponized empathy will continue to show up if leaders lack the strength or resolve to create and communicate new boundaries.

Many leaders who aim for empathy end up missing the mark because we misunderstand when and how to express it, because we conflate empathy with people-pleasing or doing more work ourselves, or because our compassion gets turned against us by our team members.

Chapter 3: Generational Clashes and Other Complicating Factors

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2023, there are five generations in the workplace: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. These categories cover everyone from teenagers to octogenarians.

All these generations in the workplace think a certain way, and sometimes expect their teams to see the world—and the work—in the same way they do. And when that is not intentionally understood, therein lies the rub.

In addition to generational differences and clashes, there are some issues specific to certain populations that can surface and stretch empathy-related challenges.

Group-Specific Factors

There are two key concepts to keep in mind here:

1. Our differences are challenging but also enriching. The people who work with us have a wide range of life experiences, views, biases, and perspectives. Although these differences can sometimes cause friction, they should never be targeted for eradication. Diversity is a strength that brings innovation, insight, and creativity to every company.
2. Understanding leads to empathy. Acknowledging that people come from diverse backgrounds and

bring different things to the table allows us to access even more empathy. Learning about how our unique life experiences lead to different perspectives enables us to understand each other, uncover new solutions, and collaborate more effectively.

Let's examine a few examples of groups who face empathy challenges.

First-Generation Professionals (FGPs)

FGPs are among the first in their immediate families to obtain a college degree or be hired for a higher-level professional position than either parent held. They may be trailblazers in their own families, but at work they sometimes lack insider knowledge and context for office politics and social mores, which can cause interpersonal friction and misunderstandings.

Underrepresented and Marginalized Ethnic Identities

Black and Brown people, immigrants, Indigenous people, members of religious minorities, and other groups who share common cultural backgrounds or descent often face resistance, misunderstanding, microaggressions, unconscious bias, and even outright discrimination in their workplaces. It's the responsibility of leaders to cultivate understanding of these challenges and develop empathetic strategies that respect people's differences.

Underrepresented and Marginalized Gender or Sexual Identities

Empathy tensions may affect queer, gay, lesbian, transgender, gender fluid, asexual, or bisexual people in the workplace, especially with coworkers from older generations. It's also important to note that there are many subcultures and differences within this catch-all category; it is not just one homogenous group. Again, leadership must take the helm to facilitate understanding, acceptance, and empathy.

People with Differing Abilities

People who have physical differences, neurodiverse people, and people who struggle with mental health challenges may have long-standing workplace regulations in their favor, but they still come up against coworker bias and misunderstanding. This is especially true if these workers need extra accommodations, resources, and time to complete certain tasks; if they communicate or process information differently; or if they have a disability that is invisible to observers.

Part II: The Five Pillars of Effective Empathetic Leadership

Even with a solid definition in place, it can be hard to envision modeling empathetic leadership when you're operating in a high-pressure workplace on a daily basis. I believe modern leaders need high-level, broadly applicable guidelines to help them shape their policies and guide their choices.

Through years of study and hundreds of interviews, I've determined that empathetically healthy business leaders share five key behaviors and mindsets. These are the Five Pillars of Effective Empathetic Leadership:

- Pillar 1: Self-Awareness
- Pillar 2: Self-Care
- Pillar 3: Clarity
- Pillar 4: Decisiveness
- Pillar 5: Joy

Chapter 4: Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is understanding your own strengths, blind spots, emotions, leadership style, and triggers. And helping your team members understand theirs.

Why Is Self-Awareness Important? Self-awareness helps you understand complaints and constructive feedback, know when you might need help navigating a situation, and take accountability for your actions. It helps you know where you shine and where you can best contribute and complement your team.

How Does Self-Awareness Benefit Empathetic Leaders?

- Shapes how you interact with team members
- Builds trust in you as a leader
- Keeps you open to change
- Helps you champion learning and development

How to Become More Self-Aware

1. Request input from team members and colleagues

Since you won't be able to surface all of your blind spots—traits or beliefs that impact how you behave, what you believe, and how effective you can be—you'll need help. The best way to see these blind spots clearly is to ask for feedback from the people around you.

Clarity doesn't come from having the right answer;
it comes from asking the right questions.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Create an anonymous suggestion box
- Ask for input at regular intervals
- Institute 360 reviews
- Assemble a personal advisory board

2. Leverage self-assessment tools

There are hundreds of tests, diagnostics, and self-assessment tools out there that can help leaders get clarity on their leadership style, strengths, challenges, and triggers. None is foolproof, but all will help you fine-tune your understanding of yourself as a leader.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Myers-Briggs® Type Indicator (MBTI)
- CliftonStrengths
- Enneagram
- HEARTI
- Self-reflect and self-evaluate

3. Learn to listen deeply

Self-aware leaders seek out new perspectives, pursue new ways of looking at the challenges, and make space for other points of view. To cultivate these skills, leaders must first learn to put their egos aside and listen deeply, a practice that involves both remaining open to outside input and tapping into self-awareness. Challenge yourself to listen to *understand* instead of just listening to *reply*.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Practice emotional regulation
- Listen to understand
- Focus on service as a leader

What You Risk If You Lack Self-Awareness

Lack of self-awareness can be dangerous, causing leaders to exist in an optimism bubble, which is not rooted in the reality of what is going on with their people.

Self-aware leaders are better able to set healthy boundaries and avoid burnout than leaders who plow through life with little self-reflection. Understanding your own emotions, leadership style, and triggers helps you see when you need to pull back, be firmer, manage your time more carefully, take time off, and create other constraints that protect your well-being.

Chapter 5: Self-Care

Self-care is enforcing strong boundaries, taking time to recharge, delegating, resting, and stewarding one's own mental health as a leader.

Why Is Self-Care Important? Depleted leaders are ineffective leaders. It can be tempting to shoulder additional burdens in the name of empathy, but in the end, you are doing yourself and your team a disservice. True empathy means treating yourself as empathetically as you should your employees. It means getting your own house in order so you have the capacity to meet other perspectives with curiosity, not defensiveness or fear.

Burnout is the result of deprioritizing self-care. It happens when you drive yourself to exhaustion while coping with an unmanageable workload or lack of boundaries, and it is exacerbated by feeling you lack control of your work or need more support from your colleagues. It's a lack of empathy for yourself—plain and simple. Reclaiming self-care enables you to manage these factors somewhat by conserving your energy and protecting your mental health.

How Does Self-Care Benefit Empathetic Leaders?

- Enables leaders to set stricter boundaries
- Helps keep burnout at bay
- Makes leaders more effective when they feel healthy and recharged
- Keeps priorities in focus
- Models healthy behavior for others to follow

How to Incorporate More Self-Care

1. Honor who you are

When leaders stay in touch with who they are and what they represent, that goes a long way toward taking care of themselves. Those who try to be someone they're not end up negatively impacting their mental health; those who show up as themselves and understand how they operate are better able to enforce their preferences and limitations.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Work with a coach
- Know your triggers

2. Seek support and advice

Along with boundaries, exercise, and other individual self-care practices, leaders can benefit tremendously from seeking peer support. Feeling understood by those in similar situations goes a long way toward alleviating work stress and cultivating self-compassion. Peer support groups, trusted advisors/mentors, and people who can serve as objective sounding boards are priceless to leaders grappling with complex challenges and issues.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Find a mentor
- Assemble a personal advisory board
- Consider connecting with a personal therapist

3. Recharge and renew

Taking time off, moving your body, making space for your personal life, and finding ways to truly rest are all practices with proven health benefits. But for years, leaders felt like they were indulgences instead of necessities.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Use your paid time off
- Set hard boundaries around time at home
- Embrace your non-work interests

What You Risk If You Don't Take Care of Yourself

If, as a leader, you ignore self-care as a regular, personal practice, you won't just get burned out; you'll get worn down. You'll become so depleted that when something minor goes wrong or some piece of criticism hits the wrong way, you'll struggle to recover. When you've got nothing left to give and no energy left to spare, everything feels like an

insurmountable crisis. And that makes you turn inward in self-preservation, rather than outward in empathy.

Chapter 6: Clarity

Clarity is ensuring everyone is on the exact same page through clear communication, expectations, feedback, and understanding of job roles—all of which roll up to an actionable mission statement and meaningful company values.

Why Is Clarity Important? Resentments build where misunderstandings thrive. One of the biggest reasons leaders and workers butt heads is lack of communication on mission, roles, and responsibilities. When people know what's expected of them, including in emergencies and on an as-needed basis, they are less likely to become disgruntled or even feel entitled. Clarity helps people feel seen, heard, and valued; reduces the likelihood of conflict; and enables everyone to work together more effectively.

In short, clarity is a form of kindness.

How Does Clarity Benefit Empathetic Leaders?

- Builds trust and loyalty
- Reduces conflict
- Helps maintain healthy boundaries through clear communication
- Encourages others to communicate with the same clarity

How to Incorporate More Clarity

1. Revisit purpose and values

Clarity on minutiae won't mean bupkis if your teams don't have foundational clarity on the company's purpose and values. And neither leaders nor employees will be able to act compassionately if the shared purpose and values are confusing or vague.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Externalize, organize, and focus
- Write or revamp your vision and mission statements
- Work with a consultant

2. Clarify roles and expectations

How many people review their job descriptions after they've been hired? The number probably approaches zero, except during annual review periods. Given that, consider what you can do to ensure your team members understand and agree

Empathetic leadership is about doing what will best support people's growth, balancing their needs with business priorities, or being extremely candid instead of prolonging an unhealthy situation.

to their roles and responsibilities; doing this is incredibly empathetic since it shows you're thinking about the best uses of their time and considering how to balance their duties.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Create rules of engagement
- Destigmatize ownership discussions

3. Link clarity to accountability

You can't hold people accountable if they're not clear on their expectations and goals. Start by making sure every person you work with understands that accountability means taking ownership of mistakes and working to make things right rather than avoiding conflict or blaming others—and also encompasses taking ownership of the purpose and the mission.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Create career progression maps
- Publicly celebrate and reward milestones

4. Tell people why

Leaders are busy and overwhelmed, which means they often convey what needs to be done and when but omit the reason *why*. Without that context, people can feel disrespected or kept in the dark. This amounts to an empathy gap, and one that can be closed quickly and easily with clear explanations for any changes in duties or expectations.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Build why into your documentation
- Build a culture of why

5. Ask better questions

Little-known fact: clarity doesn't come from having the right answer; it comes from asking the right questions. How can you assess what your next step is with this person and get them to be clear? By asking, "What do you need from me in this moment? Do you want me to see it, solve it, or support you?"

Here are other tactics to try:

- Use "I like, I wish, I wonder" to guide conversations
- Frame your questions carefully
- Ask questions that invite collaboration

6. Create (and embrace) a feedback loop

Being clear isn't just about how you communicate; it's about how your communication is received. In order to know how people are reacting to your efforts at clarity, you need to both ask them and be prepared to adjust your communication strategies accordingly.

Here's a tactic to try:

- Cultivate a culture of honesty

What You Risk If You Don't Embrace Clarity

The business risks of unclear communication are well known. Research by Crucial Learning found that 43% of workers estimate they waste two weeks or more thinking about (but not acting on) an unresolved problem at work. Additionally, one-third of employees believe their inability to speak up in tough situations has cost their organizations at least \$25,000.

But the costs in trust, social capital, company culture, and interpersonal relationships are potentially even greater. For instance, lack of clarity from leaders makes it difficult for team members to stay motivated. If they don't understand what they should be doing or why it matters to the company, they become disconnected from their work.

Chapter 7: Decisiveness

Decisiveness is taking thoughtful but swift action that doesn't leave people hanging, addressing issues before they fester, synthesizing input and perspectives to make timely choices, and practicing radical and kind honesty.

Why Is Decisiveness Important? Keeping people in limbo is one of the least empathetic things a leader can do. It can feel risky to commit to decisions quickly, but

dragging your feet to avoid hurting feelings will only erode trust. Addressing choices, performance issues, action plans, and pending questions as soon as possible is the most compassionate way to operate. Doing this shows your team members that you are paying attention and want them to know what to expect.

How Does Decisiveness Benefit Empathetic Leaders?

- Shows respect
- Relieves stress
- Leads to prioritization
- Fosters confidence

How to Incorporate More Decisiveness

1. Revisit your goal and purpose—often

Much of the time, leaders can get caught up in the drama surrounding important decisions and lose sight of the goal. Create a way to clearly kick yourself in the pants as you make a decision: make your goal physically visible using a sticky note or by including it at the top of every discussion agenda. Read the mission out loud when you kick off meetings to reorient everyone to true north.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Bake in goal-review processes
- Make goal-centricity a group endeavor

2. Practice transparency

There's no need to make all decisions in a secretive way and unveil them only when they are fully baked. Learn to be clear more quickly, and if possible, talk openly about the choices you're making and have made. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Share your failures
- Talk through decisions with trusted colleagues

3. Solicit and synthesize input quickly and fairly

Become skilled at gathering facts and opinions, giving others a voice so they can point out opportunities or risks you may have missed, sorting through all the input, and coming to a conclusion. Practice soliciting input from others, but be clear that once a decision is made, naysayers will be asked to disagree and commit.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Focus on impact
- Express enthusiasm for feedback aloud
- Start small

4. Put a deadline on your thoughts

Decisiveness isn't only about making good choices; it's about making good choices *in a timely manner*. If you tend to ruminate endlessly, you need a mechanism to get yourself unstuck, such as setting aside a block of time to make a decision, which is itself a task.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Leverage tech
- Schedule a decision review block each day

5. Build trust

In an environment where trust has been cultivated and built, people are more willing to trust a leader's decisions, even if it's a tough decision for them to swallow. If your people don't trust you, they're less likely to think your decisions have been reached fairly, with everyone's input and overall best interests in mind.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Follow through on your promises
- Be honest
- Avoid micromanagement

6. Adopt a design-thinking approach

Design thinking asks us to experiment and try things out to see if they will fly in the real world. If you force yourself to consider every option until you're sure you've selected the "perfect" one, you may never make a decision for fear of being wrong. Don't succumb to analysis paralysis. Instead, gather input, decide, and move forward with a sense of curiosity and experimentation.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Trust yourself to adapt
- Create CO-STORMING™ sessions

What You Risk If You Don't Embrace Decisiveness

Leaders who lack decisiveness risk eroding trust, skewing priorities, and prioritizing their own comfort over taking

Depleted leaders are ineffective leaders.

tough but compassionate action. Empathetic leadership isn't always about making people feel warm and fuzzy inside; often, it's about doing what will best support their growth, balancing their needs with business priorities, or being extremely candid instead of prolonging an unhealthy situation.

Chapter 8: Joy

Joy is ensuring people enjoy their work, encouraging work friendships, and creating a thriving culture even when the work itself is challenging.

Why Is Joy Important? Multiple studies have shown that when people enjoy their work, it leads to lower rates of turnover, higher productivity and engagement, increased company profits, and loyalty to the employer. But beyond these pragmatic reasons, empathetic business leaders generally want their teams to be happy, successful, and fulfilled to buoy the overall culture. A joyful work culture breeds trust to collaborate, innovate, and take risks. It empowers people to have each other's backs.

How Does Joy Benefit Empathetic Leaders?

- Reduces stress
- Makes team members easier to lead
- Fosters trust and collaboration

How to Incorporate More Joy

1. Find and encourage humor

The ability to laugh at ourselves and to find humor in tough situations is a sure sign of resilience, which is just what healthy teams need. Things can and will go wrong, but when we stop taking ourselves so seriously, we can engage our prefrontal cortex to problem-solve more effectively.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Use the rule of three
- Incorporate challenges and contests
- Don't try too hard

2. Learn improv skills to nurture creativity and trust

Improv best practices could be helpful to collaborative teams in virtually any environment and has since been teaching workplace teams how to use comedy and improv as tools to unleash trust and collaboration that leads to innovation.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Practice “yes, and”
- Listen intently

3. Encourage workplace friendships

The average person spends 81,396 hours—the equivalent of more than nine years—at work. And mountains of research indicate that having friends in the workplace doesn't only boost job satisfaction and performance but also improves wellness.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Create a safe environment
- Be curious
- Try the buddy system

4. Make meaningful team-building a priority

Team-building has gotten a bad rap over the years as a cheesy, forced way to forge bonds, but when it's done thoughtfully, it can totally transform interpersonal dynamics for the better. It can lead to the formation of work friendships and bolster trust among teammates, and help everyone build important interpersonal skills, which ultimately creates a more connected team.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Tie team-building to purpose
- Give back to the community
- Consider diverse needs

5. Celebrate together

Joy at work is directly tied to feelings of purpose, accomplishment, and connection. That domino effect boosts en-

agement and, ultimately, performance. Which means that actively celebrating wins as a team will up the joy quotient faster than just about anything else.

Here are some tactics to try:

- Encourage frequent praise from leaders and peers
- Ask about celebration preferences
- Celebrate internal work

What You Risk If You Don't Embrace Joy

Leaders who ignore this pillar will have less joy themselves, which is bad enough, but they also risk driving their teams to exhaustion and detachment.

Since recent Gallup data shows that work friendships are strongly correlated to a long string of positive business outcomes, including improvements in profitability, safety, inventory control, and employee retention, it's likely that lonely, isolated employees will lag behind in these areas.

What's Next: The Future of Empathetic Leadership

Past, Present, and Future

Setting up new leaders for success won't be easy, though, especially given the legacy of leadership that still lingers and the emerging challenges we all face.

When you leverage and fortify the Five Pillars of Effective Empathetic Leadership—self-awareness, self-care, clarity, decisiveness, and joy—you're making yourself irreplaceable. Your ability to effectively balance empathy with all the other demands will see you through these shifts, and it

will even give you an advantage over others as the working world continues to evolve.

Organizational leaders of today must continue to champion empathy in balance with boundaries and compassion alongside self-care.

Empathetic Leadership Can Start Early

The way forward can be made even easier if today's leaders start modeling and teaching empathy to younger and younger generations. We need to use the Five Pillars of Effective Empathetic Leadership so we can practice healthy empathy, support our teams, and achieve performance goals while still taking care of ourselves. Because if we burn out and quit, who will take up the mantle?

Successful Leaders Embrace Both/And Thinking

Far too many people believe empathetic leadership is an either/or proposition when it's really both/and. As business leaders, we absolutely can embrace empathy and ambition, compassion and competition, kindness and high performance.

But only if we have the right foundation to embrace empathy in a healthy way.

We must always remember that empathy is more about mutual understanding and support than it is about flexibility, acquiescence, or niceness. With that understanding, we can strike that vital balance between empathetic policies and outstanding performance. We can build engaged, effective, and innovative teams who do excellent work—happily and sustainably.

And with that balance in mind, we as leaders can also thrive and flourish in the process.



Maria Ross is a speaker, facilitator, author, strategist, and empathy advocate who champions the balance of cash flow, creativity, and compassion in leadership. Through her consulting and as host of *The Empathy Edge* podcast, she helps leaders and teams worldwide use empathy to drive growth and impact. A brain aneurysm in 2008 inspired her memoir *Rebooting My Brain*, deepening her commitment to empathy in both life and work. Her insights have been featured in major outlets including MSNBC, NPR, Forbes, and *Entrepreneur*, and she has spoken for organizations such as Salesforce, TBWA\Worldwide, and the New York Times. Maria lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, son, and rescue dog.

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