



FEBRUARY 16, 2022 LEADERSHIP



By [Scott Clark](#)

According to a [one poll](#), 20 percent of Americans have lost someone close to them during the COVID pandemic. Based on the working population, that means 42 percent of employees are grieving the loss of a loved one. And that poll was released by AP nearly one year ago in March 2021.

Based on that fact alone, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a demand for more empathetic leadership in the workplace. After a challenging two years, many still face high levels of stress and anxiety. Concerns over health and safety when they return to the office, grief over friends and loved ones lost, continued school closings in some locations, layoffs, isolation — all have heightened stress to a level most people have not been accustomed to.

Although some believe the pandemic is finally waning, society still hasn't found its footing. Leaders must, therefore, continue to be emotionally intelligent and build resilience to help employees find calm and some sense of normalcy in 2022.

“Empathy has been one of the most critical leadership skills since the start of 2020 and has only been underlined as an increasingly important practice in light of the Great Resignation

and the war for talent," said Bojan Simic, CEO and CTO of [HYPR](#), an identity management solution provider. "For the first time, across the board, empathy is not only expected of leaders and their workplaces but is demanded as well."

The Numbers Behind the Volatile Workplace Today

A [MetLife study](#) on employee benefit trends showed 58 percent of employees who are struggling indicated their employer doesn't offer mental health programs that fulfill their needs — and those that do are hard to access or understand. The study also revealed that 33 percent of employees who are struggling took time off from work because of stress.

Cheryl Brown Merriwether, vice president and executive director of [ICARE](#), an Orlando, Fla.-based center for addiction and recovery education, said the effects of the past two years have been similar in many ways to the battlefield fatigue that soldiers experience. "There is a term that was coined by the military to describe the environmental conditions they faced on the battlefield in Iraq and Afghanistan. The term is VUCA," she said.

The concept of VUCA, which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, is increasingly taught in business school and in leadership education programs because it accurately describes the workplace today.

"While many in the workforce may not have ever put on an armed services uniform, they nevertheless are casualties of war, having fought on the frontline ... facing an unseen but deadly enemy that goes by the name of COVID," Brown Merriwether said.

Leadership Skill No. 1: Empathy, Not Sympathy

For business leaders, being able to feel empathy for their customers and employees provides them with actionable insights that enhance products and services, as well as the lives of their customers and employees. By putting themselves in another person's shoes, leaders can more fully understand the situation — and the person experiencing it.

“Empathy goes deeper than sympathy in that it allows one to understand or share in the emotions or feelings that others experience as if they were personally put in a similar position,” said Brown Merriwether. “A lack of empathy among co-workers can result in misunderstandings, conflict, division or isolation.”

To address this directly, she suggested leaders openly and sincerely acknowledge and communicate the value and need for empathy within their teams, and look for ways to encourage, acknowledge and reinforce empathetic behaviors by others. The ideal result is that more empathetic leadership will create a culture of trust and innovation, which can help drive business growth.

Tips and Tactics to Be More Empathetic

Consulting firm [EY's 2021 Empathy in Business Survey report](#) showed that nearly half (46 percent) of employees feel their organization's efforts to be empathetic toward employees are dishonest, and 42 percent said their employer doesn't follow through on promises. That presents leaders with both a challenge and opportunity. Alison Lindland, senior vice president of strategy at [Movable Ink](#), a New York-based marketing software company, said leaders have the opportunity to build a new work architecture centered around empathy that will scale companies far into the future.

"In a world of Zoom and Slack avatars, it will set you apart from the rest," she said.

Much has changed over the past few years, and there remains a great deal of uncertainty. From return-to-office strategies to periodic COVID outbreaks and market volatility, employees remain atop a rollercoaster of emotions. It's imperative for leaders to be empathetic and help employees feel safe and valued.

"Empathy will help you engage and retain the most loyal employees who will help drive your business to the next level," Lindland said. In practical terms, that means accommodating how employees want and need to work, she said, and rethinking the workplace to remove the constraints of the past. One way to support employees is for leaders to sponsor the rollout of more learning and development courses to meet changing needs.

Leadership Skill No. 2: Building Resilience

When employees go through turbulent times, major changes in the workplace or significant life events, the ability to quickly recover and adapt can help them weather the storm and rise to the challenge. Developing specific strategies for reducing vulnerability to stress and the negative effects of adversity can strengthen and develop personal resilience. But before a gap in resilience, or any other skill for that matter, can be closed, it must be identified.

"Before we can build or enhance resilience in ourselves or others, we must first revisit and review our current capacity to cope as evidenced by how we responded in the past when faced with hardship, difficulty or adversity," Brown Merriwether said.

She said business leaders are no different than other employees who have been subjected to stress. "The challenges and impact of today's VUCA workplace are not isolated to only one particular role in the workplace," Brown Merriwether said. "Rather, the stressors extend to and encompass individuals at all levels and across positions within the enterprise."

Tips and Tactics for Developing Resilience

Organizations looking to build or enhance resilience should first develop resilience training that teaches leaders — and eventually all employees — how to handle challenges and setbacks.

Teresa Hopke, CEO of the Americas for global coaching firm [Talking Talent](#), said there is a need for leaders to hone their human skills, including compassion, empathy and vulnerability.

"They need to learn how to slow down and pay attention to body language and to pick up on nuances of conversations," she said. "They need to learn how to plan ahead and send out agendas for meetings so that people who are more introverted or processors of information have an opportunity to prepare for meetings. They need to check in with people after meetings and conversations to ensure they felt heard and were able to share."

Hopke said the best way to do so is through group or 1:1 coaching that seeks to identify mindsets and behaviors around their own leadership styles and approaches. Emotional intelligence skills are the most valuable for those employees who are still feeling the stress of the pandemic.

"Empathy, vulnerability, compassion — these are all things people are expecting their managers to show throughout the pandemic and beyond," she said.

Empathy and resilience are vital skills for both leaders and employees in the post-pandemic world. Empathy allows people to gain a greater understanding of how others may feel and what they think, while resilience enables them to better deal with stress and anxiety in both the short and long term.

"Leaders in all industries need to be empathetic, understanding and flexible with employees," HYPR's Simic said. "It's not only representative of good leadership but a healthy workplace as well."