

Teams grow stronger when managers show openness and vulnerability

*A survey of over 12,000 global employees reveals that people are more willing to go the extra mile at work when their manager is open and shows vulnerability. **Allyson Zimmermann** writes that these employees tend to be more creative, dedicated, and willing to go “above and beyond”. Leaders who show vulnerability and empathy are stronger, not weaker. Their teams tend to feel psychologically safer, and to express themselves more freely without fear of making mistakes.*

In a time of crisis, it is natural to want to connect with others and show openness and vulnerability. These connections are also beneficial for an organisation’s performance and workplace culture in the long term.

A new [Catalyst survey](#) of over 12,000 global employees reveals that employees are more willing to go the extra mile when their manager is open and shows vulnerability. It reveals that the percentage of employees who say they are often creative, dedicated, and willing to go “above and beyond” significantly increases when they see their manager as displaying openness more frequently and when their manager frequently displays vulnerability.

Yet, according to the [survey](#) only **39%** of employees said their manager often or always displayed openness; and **24%** said their manager was often or always vulnerable. These numbers are disappointing when we know how important connections are to positive work outcomes.

Studies have shown how crucial ‘connection’ is between leaders and their employees. Perhaps, traditionally, leaders showing emotion was viewed as a sign of weakness. However, Catalyst’s data shows that leaders who are able to openly show authentic emotion and vulnerability are often stronger leaders who are able to harness the best qualities in their employees.

Organisations should encourage leaders to feel able to show openness and vulnerability. [Inclusive leadership](#) helps create a culture in which people can bring their whole selves to work. Not having to ‘cover’ who they are is an essential part of creating a ‘psychologically safe’ workplace. Once workers feel psychologically safe, they feel they can express themselves and make mistakes without penalty.

During the pandemic, ensuring psychological safety in the workplace has gone hand in hand with creating resilient teams. Leaders have needed to engage in “dialogue and learning” to allow team members to feel heard and seen. Being a good listener requires [empathy, a leadership skill](#) useful for connecting with employees.

It may feel uncomfortable, but it is important that leaders can talk about and show emotions, from happiness to disappointment and anxiety, in the workplace. We need to feel comfortable with getting to know our colleagues, while observing their boundaries of privacy, too.

To show openness, it is important for managers to share information about themselves as well as showing a genuine interest in their employees’ lives. Find ways to generate a two-way conversation to foster relationships, from a virtual watercooler or ‘coffee’ break to a quick ‘how are you doing?’ meeting. Ice breakers at the beginning of meetings are a good way to find out more about team members as well as setting the tone for a safe, exchange of ideas.

Empathy [can be learned](#). It can be practised by checking that another person’s perspective is seen accurately and is acknowledged. Active listening and mirroring behaviours can help show empathy.

When we talk to companies, what often comes up is the fear of getting something wrong or saying the wrong thing, especially when it comes to having [conversations about race and ethnicity](#). It is not a sign of weakness to show that you are struggling with how best to approach a topic, but only by leading by example and normalising these conversations will leaders allow others to feel comfortable in sharing their own feelings and experiences. Of course, while being mindful that everyone has a different threshold of what they feel psychologically safe to share.

We have all been through massive change and disruption in the last year and employees are expecting more from their employers than ever before. Work has been an anchor for some during the pandemic, but many have wanted a deeper connection with colleagues to share their vulnerabilities and fears.

This study demonstrates how important openness and vulnerability are in the workplace, and particularly in creating a resilient team in a time of crisis. They are a strength, not a weakness, at work, and ensure that teams continue to thrive even during uncertain times. Leaders should cultivate these essential connections to inspire and create an innovative and engaged workplace.



Notes:

- *This blog post is based on [Why Leaders Must Connect More During Times of Crisis](#).*
- *The post expresses the views of its author(s), and do not necessarily represent those of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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