



# FACTSHEET

## LEADING WITH EMPATHY, COMPASSION AND INCLUSION

### Introduction

In these extraordinary times, we have seen an acceleration of empathy and compassion as responsible business has stepped up to support employees.

As the separation between work and home has diminished further, it is enabling people to 'bring their whole selves to work'. Through online connection, we are seeing into each other's homes, meeting each other's families, and hearing stories from those balancing caring for children at home with work during lockdown.

In the face of uncertainty, many people are experiencing anxiety and fear. However, this period has also been a catalyst for the underlying demand for empathy, compassion, and greater inclusion at work. Barriers have been broken down and our shared humanity has come to the fore.

There are challenging economical and psychological circumstances ahead for UK business. We must lean into our learned shared humanity to ensure our future economic recovery. 'Kindness' is the theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week and Business in the Community (BITC) is calling on responsible business to amplify empathy, compassion and inclusion.

Leading with empathy, compassion and inclusion is not a luxury but essential to economic recovery and sustainable business and high empathy companies have a competitive advantage in terms of attracting and retaining the best talent.

**EMPATHY is widely understood as being able to resonate with someone else's feelings, effectively being able to metaphorically put yourself in someone else's shoes and feel with someone in their given circumstances. This can lead to people feeling recognised and valued.<sup>i</sup>**

**COMPASSION takes empathy a step further. It is about recognising the circumstances of another person or group of people and, critically, feeling compelled to take action to improve those circumstances.<sup>ii</sup>**

**INCLUSION is defined by an employee feeling valued for their uniqueness, being able to act authentically at work and feeling a sense of belonging without need to conform to group norms.<sup>iii</sup>**

**Calls to action for leaders to lead with empathy and compassion** (drawn from BITC's recent research, member insights, webinars with leading experts and best practice from BITC's Wellbeing Leadership Team)





- Make empathy, compassion, and inclusion the driving principles of leadership. Act with honesty and authenticity and remember you do not have to have all the answers yet but show that you are open to working together to find them.
- Maintain regular communication with your people – even if there is little new to say. Communicate the big picture to foster a shared sense of understanding in your organisation.
- Share human stories to build trust and community. Sharing stories about your mental health and how you are coping with the pandemic will also reduce stigma and foster an open culture.
- Have the courage to do the right thing by being fair and reasonable. For example, if you must make redundancies, take extra care to break the news with compassion. Your aim is to treat people with dignity, fairness, and respect.
- Recognise that many employees will be feeling anxious about returning to a physical place of work while needing to maintain social distancing. Carry out health, safety, and wellbeing audits. Take appropriate action to fulfil your duty of care to safeguard both the physical and mental health and safety of employees. Communicate with employees on the steps you are taking. (See [BITC's Lessons from COVID-19 on job design to enhance health and wellbeing webinar](#) for Society of Occupational Health and Medicine's recommendations).
- Reduce excessive pressure and consider the human impact before commissioning and delegating work. Consider allocating further resources, budget, or time to teams if objectives are not reasonably achievable within the capacity of the team.
- Recognise and reward empathy compassion and inclusion within your organisation as highly as technical skills
- Think about the policies that may need to change to ensure line managers can do the right thing quickly, such as flexible working, emergency dependents leave and annual leave policies. See [ACAS](#) and [CIPD](#) for more information.
- Take an inclusive and employee-led approach to providing support and, where possible, provide tailored support and reasonable adjustments.
- Trust your people and remain pragmatic. Remember people are working from home during a crisis, not 'working from home'. Employees may not be able to be as productive as previously.
- Adopt habits that foster inclusion (see below).

**Calls to action for leaders to enable line managers** (drawn from BITC member insights and best practice from BITC's Wellbeing Leadership Team).

- Ask line managers what their challenges are. Listen and support them to achieve solutions
- Empathy can be learned – coach and educate leadership and management as well as introducing empathy training for your people managers.
- Set clear reasonable expectations. For example, make line management a top priority and encourage line managers to act with empathy, compassion, and inclusive behaviours.
- Line manage the line managers with empathy, compassion, and inclusive behaviours. The way they are treated is the way they will inform how they behave themselves.





- Give line managers the opportunity to talk and share ideas as part of regular virtual support forums such as through group video calls. These calls are also useful as a temperature check. Ask: Are the changes we are introducing working? What more could we be doing? Do colleagues and line managers feel supported?

**Be aware of potential workplace barriers to empathy, compassion and inclusion and how to take action**

- Studies have shown that people can be unconsciously biased towards being empathetic and compassionate to 'people like themselves'<sup>iv</sup>
  - ✓ See [BITC's Ethnicity and economic impact factsheet](#) to examine the impact of the pandemic on black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people in the workplace.
- Be aware of emotional burnout from empathetic distress (absorbing the negative emotion to a point of experiencing them) and that it can be harder to show empathy when under stress and excessive workloads.

<sup>i</sup> Compassion at Work Toolkit (2017); Oscar Kilo; [available at oscarkilo.org.uk](http://available.at.oscarkilo.org.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> Compassion at Work Toolkit (2017); Oscar Kilo; [available at oscarkilo.org.uk](http://available.at.oscarkilo.org.uk)

- ✓ Leaders must design work and workplaces that awaken compassion

**Call to action, adopt the habits to foster inclusion**

**Find common ground through relatedness**

- Share experiences and goals

**Lift people up through status and fairness**

- Create psychological safety and trust among employees
- Ask for contributions and ideas
- Share opportunities

**Help create clarity through certainty and autonomy**

- Keep people in the loop
- Explain your choices
- Give people a feeling of control

<sup>iii</sup> [Building Inclusive Workplaces; CIPD; available at cipd.org.uk](#)

<sup>iv</sup> SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others (2008); Neuro Leadership Journal; [available at web.archive.org](http://available.at.web.archive.org)

