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## **ARTICLE** **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

# Making Empathy Central to Your Company Culture

*by Jamil Zaki*

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# Making Empathy Central to Your Company Culture

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In [Tim Cook's 2017 MIT commencement address](#), he warned graduates, "People will try to convince you that you should keep empathy out of your career. Don't accept this false premise." The Apple CEO is not alone in recognizing and emphasizing the importance of *empathy* — the ability to share and understand others' emotions — at work. At the time of his remarks, 20% of U.S. employers offered [empathy training](#) for managers. In a [recent survey](#) of 150 CEOs, over 80% recognized empathy as key to success.

Research demonstrates that Cook and other leaders are on to something. Empathic workplaces tend to enjoy [stronger collaboration](#), [less stress](#), and [greater morale](#), and their employees [bounce back](#) more quickly from difficult moments such as layoffs. Still, despite their efforts, many leaders struggle to actually make caring part of their organizational culture. In fact, there's often a rift between the culture executives want from the one they have.

Imagine a company whose culture is defined by aggression and competition. The CEO realizes he and his colleagues can't go on this way so he hastily rolls out empathy as a key new corporate value. It's a well-intentioned move, but he has shifted the goal posts, creating distance between the organization's *ideals* — prescriptions for how people ought to behave — and its current social *norms*— how most members of a group actually behave. He might hope this will put employees in an aspirational mood, but evidence suggests the opposite. When norms and ideals clash, people gravitate towards [what others do](#), not what they're told to do. What's worse, people who adhered to the previous culture might feel betrayed or see leadership as hypocritical and out of touch.

Thankfully there's a way to work with the power of social norms instead of against them, and consequently change cultures. As I describe in my book, [The War for Kindness](#), people conform not just to others' bad behaviors, but also adhere to kind and productive norms. For instance, after seeing people [vote](#), [conserve energy](#), or [donate to charity](#), people are more likely to do so themselves. My own research also demonstrates that [empathy is contagious](#): people “catch” each other's care and altruism. Here are a few ways leaders can leverage this insight to build empathy in their workplace.

**Acknowledge the potential for growth.** When people think of empathy as a trait that people either have or don't have, it may seem out of reach. If you can't learn something, why bother trying? Carol Dweck, Karina Schumman, and I [have found](#) that people who have this kind of “fixed mindset” around empathy work less hard to connect with others. If such beliefs permeate an organization, encouraging empathy as a collective value will fall flat.

The good news is that our mindsets can change. In a follow-up study as part of [the research I mentioned above](#), my coauthors and I presented people with evidence that empathy is less like a trait and more like a skill. They responded by working harder at it, even when it didn't come naturally. In other words, the first step towards building empathy is acknowledging that it *can be built*. Leaders should start by assessing the mindsets of their employees, and teaching them that they can indeed move towards their ideals.

**Highlight the right norms.** The loudest voices are seldom the kindest, but when they dominate conversations, they can also hijack our perceptions. Hard-partying college freshmen brag about their weekend exploits, and their peers [end up thinking](#) that the average student likes binge drinking more than they really do. When one team member loudly expresses a toxic attitude, colleagues can confuse theirs for the majority opinion. Such “phantom norms” can derail positive change when people conform to them.

Leaders can fight back against phantom norms by drawing attention to the right behaviors. At any moment, some individuals in an organization are acting kindly while others are not. Some are working together while others are competing. Empathy often belongs to a quiet majority. Foregrounding it — for instance through incentives and recognition — can allow employees to see its prevalence, turning up the volume on a positive norm.

**Find culture leaders and co-create with them.** Every group, whether it's a NBA team, a corporate division, or a police department, has people who encourage team cohesion even though it's not part of their formal role. These individuals might not be the most popular or powerful, but they are the most connected. Information, ideas, and values [flow through them](#). They are their groups' unsung influencers.

In [a recent study](#), Betsy Levy Paluck and her colleagues used this wisdom to change culture in middle schools. They deputized students to create anti-bullying campaigns which were then spread around campus. The student deputies varied in how socially well-connected they were. Levy Paluck found that peer-led anti-bullying campaigns worked but were especially effective when they were helmed by the most connected students.

To build empathic cultures, leaders can begin by identifying connectors, and recruiting them for help championing the cause. This not only increases the likelihood that new ideals will “take”; it also allows employees to be recognized for connecting with others — highlighting another positive social norm at the same time.

Empathy deserves its buzzy status, and leaders are wise to desire it for their businesses. But to succeed in making it part of their organization's DNA, they must pay close attention to how cultures build and change — organically, collectively, and often from the bottom up.

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