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Empathy has long been viewed as a straightforward strength in leadership, but it has recently become a political flashpoint. (Getty Images/Unsplash+)

# Empathy is under attack — but it remains vital for leadership and connection

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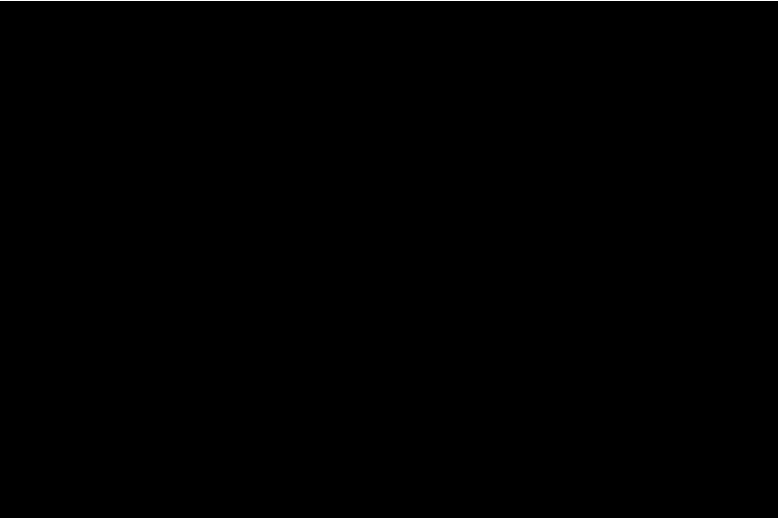
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Once considered a universal good, empathy now divides as much as it unites. Empathy has long been viewed as a straightforward strength in leadership, but it has recently become a political flashpoint.

Some conservative voices, including billionaire Elon Musk, have criticized empathy, with Musk calling it a “fundamental weakness of western civilization.”



Musk, seen here attending a news conference with U.S. President Donald Trump in the Oval Office in Washington, D.C., recently called empathy the ‘fundamental weakness’ of western civilization. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Joe Rigney, a theology fellow at New Saint Andrew’s College in Idaho, has gone further, calling it a “sin”. He argues “untethered empathy” can distort moral judgment because it may lead to people excusing harmful behaviour simply because they sympathize with the person experiencing it.

Few qualities in public life have undergone such a dramatic shift in perception as empathy. Once celebrated as both a marker of moral character and an essential leadership skill, empathy now sits at the centre of polarized debates about governance and policy.

The so-called “war” over empathy reveals not only divided views of leadership but also deeper anxieties about how we connect with one another. These tensions raise important questions about the history, promise, pitfalls and future of empathy.

## **What is empathy?**

The modern term traces back from the German term *emföhlung*, which was first used in the context of esthetics to describe the emotional response a person feels when imagining themselves moving through a painting, sculpture or scene of natural beauty.

The English term “empathy” was coined in 1908. What began as a way of describing how people relate to art later moved into psychology and leadership as researchers began to study how people identify with the feelings of others.

From there, empathy evolved into a cornerstone skill in business and management to help leaders connect more deeply with others and improve both relationships and performance.

For decades, this was presented as a clear asset. Today, however, that same capacity is viewed by some as a liability rather than a strength.

## **Why empathy matters**

Empathetic leaders can translate this capacity into practical advantage. In organizations, empathy fosters innovation by creating psychological safety — the sense that people feel they can take interpersonal risks, such as sharing ideas without fear of ridicule or retaliation.

Research shows teams learn faster and perform better when people feel safe to speak up. Empathy supports that safety by making listening genuine rather than performative. For example, when leaders regularly ask “What perspectives are we missing?” they signal that speaking up carries little risk. Empathy also strengthens collaboration by enabling leaders to recognize diverse perspectives and weave them into collective problem-solving.

By supporting growth and risk-taking, it reinforces succession pipelines and helps employees step into new responsibilities. Through deep listening and thoughtful responses, empathetic leaders build trust, inspire commitment and help teams remain resilient in the face of change.

Closeup of one person holding another person's hands, who is sitting across from them

Empathy strengthens collaboration by enabling leaders to recognize diverse perspectives and weave them into collective problem-solving. (A. C./Unsplash+)

Beyond the workplace, empathy also contributes to broader human flourishing. Findings vary across studies, but empathetic people tend to be happier, form stronger friendships and excel in their work. Health-care patients, employees and romantic partners all report higher satisfaction when empathy is present.

Still, despite its many benefits, empathy is not immune to distortion in workplaces, politics and society at large.

## **The paradox and politics of empathy**

Empathy carries an inherent paradox: people can feel genuine compassion while also recognizing the practical limits of what can realistically be offered.

In workplaces, for example, managers may empathize with employees seeking flexibility while also facing pressure to deliver results. Leaders often face difficult questions about fairness when resources are tight and not everyone’s needs can be met.

In politics, a similar dilemma arises. Leaders may, for example, express concern for refugees fleeing conflict while balancing that compassion against constraints on housing, health care and employment in the host country. Here, empathy can clash with competing obligations.

Beyond these limits, empathy can also be distorted when it lacks ethical grounding. Without self-awareness and judgment, it can lead to compassion fatigue or even be used strategically as a tool of manipulation and control. For example, after a child in Texas died from measles, anti-vaccine influencers used the case to stoke outrage and influence public opinion.

Research on negotiations highlights a related risk. Being able to understand someone else's perspective can help reveal the other side's constraints and lead to better deals, but feeling their emotions too deeply can pull negotiators off their strategy.

These concerns echo in the broader culture. Critics of empathy argue it has been politicized or weaponized to enforce conformity, with those who fail to display it toward certain groups being portrayed as weak or immoral.

## **The future of empathy**

Although findings are mixed, some studies suggest that empathy, especially among younger generations, has been in decline over the past few decades.

The reasons for this are debated, ranging from the rise of digital communication to broader social and political polarization. Regardless of the cause, the perception of decline has fuelled renewed interest in its study.

Empathy does not mean blindly agreeing with everyone or absorbing every emotion. It calls for listening with genuine curiosity, asking perspective-seeking questions and creating space for others to share their truths.

Simple practices such as naming emotions, noticing body language or imagining how a situation might feel to someone else can strengthen our capacity to connect.

When practised ethically and with courage, empathy has the potential to extend from private virtue to collective strength, and be used to rebuild trust, bridge divides, sustain communities and keep leadership anchored in humanity.