

CLIENT ALERT

Why Successful Employers Understand That Empathy is Actually a Superpower

By: Marc R. Engel, Esq.

“Empathy” has been defined in various ways including the following: “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*.

Empathy tends to get a “bad rap” in the workplace. Too often the term is used to deride employers as undisciplined, old fashioned, and “clueless” about things which, critics assert, are key to business success; namely, metrics, profit margins, and realization rates. In my experience, however, truly successful employers – ones that have established a lasting culture with engaged employees – understand that while business metrics undeniably have their place, there is no real substitute for employers and leaders who understand and practice authentic empathy.

As my friend and acclaimed business consultant and author, Dr. Alan Gregerman¹, has written about so eloquently, employees are increasingly seeking more from employment than simply a paycheck. They seek meaningful work, appreciation, grace, a sense of belonging, and work that provides a purpose.

So what, then, does empathy look like? To be sure, it is *not* the absence of workplace policies, procedures, and practices. But it *is* the consistent treatment and application of policies, procedures, and practices that have a clear and necessary purpose. Sound and effective policies and authentic empathy can co-exist in the workplace - - both concepts can (and should) be true at the same time.

At its core, empathy is a mindset – a commitment by leaders to view employees individually; and to manifest concern not only about their career development, but also their personal well-being. The essence of the importance of empathy in the workplace was captured in a podcast which I heard years ago. A well-known corporate executive was asked about business success and, specifically, the most important attributes of business success. I fully expected that the executive would launch into a diatribe about business school virtues, emphasizing things like profitability and return on investment, and that the only things that really matter are those that can be quantified. Instead, I heard the leader say something that caused me to pull over to the side of the road. He described a meeting which he had with a long-time non-managerial employee at one of his companies who was on the verge of retiring. The executive asked the employee how he had enjoyed his time at the company. The employee responded by saying that the company kept his *attention* each and every time they issued him a paycheck over the past thirty years. He added that the company could have captured his *heart and soul* if it had inquired about his well-being, his family, whether he enjoyed his job, and whether

there was anything more that the company could have done to make his experience better.

Examples of authentic empathy abound and are actually endless, and can include among other things the following:

- Meeting with employees at the outset of employment to learn about their professional career goals;
- Creating professional growth opportunities at work, and effectively communicating them to employees;
- Creating strong mentoring programs which include the input of employees;
- Providing opportunities (anonymous or otherwise) for employees to evaluate the organization without fear of retaliation;
- Training managers on effective communication strategies, including the best and most effective ways to communicate feedback to employees;
- Training managers on the real reasons – the “pushes” and “pulls” - that cause employees to quit.
- Conducting meaningful employee exit surveys to learn why employees leave (and, in turn, obtain actionable feedback that can improve retention);
- “Walking the talk”. That is, insisting that managers act in a manner which aligns with the organization’s communicated core values;
- Treating “younger” employees, who are trying hard to navigate the work world, with grace and appropriate patience; and
- Treating “older” employees with the respect they deserve, and valuing and celebrating the wisdom, experience, and other attributes they bring to the workplace.

Inspired leaders of successful organizations understand that empathy in the workplace is not an unaffordable, amorphous luxury, but rather an essential “superpower” -- one that distinguishes them in ways big and small; results in improved hiring; enhances and fortifies retention; mitigates litigation risk; and, ultimately, translates to the bottom line.

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¹ Dr. Alan Gregerman is an acclaimed author, speaker, consultant, entrepreneur, and consultant. His best-selling books include *Surrounded by Geniuses*; *The Necessity of Strangers*; and *Lessons from the Sandbox*. More information about Alan and his company, Venture Works, can be found at www.venture-works.com and www.alangregerman.com. Alan can also be reached directly by sending him an email at innovate@venture-works.com.