

Avoid the Empathy Trap – Peer Coaching Discussion

Compassion for others and authentic caring is essential for leadership effectiveness. We must thought be careful that offering empathy alone does not produce a dependency or a lack of ownership in the individual. The fallacy of empathy is the mistaken belief that offering support, understanding, and comfort will by itself, promote greater responsibility for self in the individual to whom we are offering support. Promoting greater responsibility in others for self (and results) is an essential part of being a resilient leader. Empathy must be combined with challenge to produce more sustainable behavioral change. Excessive empathy can also prove to be exhausting to a leader to “hold” the emotions of so many others, which also hinders a leader’s resilience. One of the most important things is to be “on the balcony” in observing your own tendencies in this area.

Consider carefully where and how you are offering empathy? What result is it having on you? What effect is it having on the individual? What effect is it having on the organization?

Use the following coaching questions with your peer coach to uncover your tendencies in this area:

Peer Coaching Discussion Questions:

1. What is easier or more natural for you to do – to offer comfort to those who are struggling or to challenge them to rise to the challenge?
2. Can you think of a time when you (or someone you know) stepped in to quickly to rescue someone from a challenging situation? What was the impact of that rescuing behavior?
3. How well do you as a leader set clear boundaries for those in your organization for those who may need excessive empathy?
4. To what extent can you tolerate the discomfort and pain of others as they are working through a challenging situation? How could you strengthen this ability? What leadership practices might help?
5. In your organization, do poor behaviors tend to be rescued or overly empathized with, or appropriately challenged? What is the impact on people? What is the impact of results?