

Want to improve your results? Stop shouting, start listening

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You don't have to be domineering and bullish to be successful in business. Dr Ileana Stigliani explains how empathetic leadership can improve employee engagement and retention

If I were to say the word “leader” to you, of what kind of person would you think? A dominant, assertive, Type A character? Someone who pulls no punches, who takes no prisoners, who leads singlehandedly from the front? Looking at the leaders we choose – in business, politics and beyond – you certainly would not be alone in thinking so.

It's time, however, we moved our thinking beyond this outmoded concept that has been culturally and societally ingrained for so long. A good leader is not an action hero. They are inspiring, nurturing and caring figures; a leader, in short, is empathetic. Some of you may already be thinking, “That sounds lovely, but when it comes to business, what's needed is hard, tough, masculine qualities.” Let's put this in language you might understand: empathy has a direct impact on your bottom

line.

There are numerous studies that confirm this. The top 10 companies in the latest edition of the annual [Empathy Index](#) register earnings 50% higher than the bottom 10. In their study of competitive advantage [Scott Keller and Colin Price of McKinsey & Company](#) found companies who placed an emphasis on the organisational health of employees performed two times better financially. Or to look at this from a different angle, a [study by Gallup](#) shows lost productivity resulting from a lack of employee engagement costs US companies \$450-550 billion annually.

Not taking out your problems on others requires a good deal more strength than simply barking orders and insults

Cultivate a culture of trust

A business is more than one person. It's not just how the boss performs, it's about how everyone pulls together. A study conducted by [HBR and the Energy Project](#) found employees performed better if four basic needs were met: renewal (physical needs), value (emotional needs), focus (mental needs) and purpose (spiritual needs). Employees who felt respected were 63 per cent more satisfied, 55 per cent more engaged, and 58 per cent more focused. They were also 110 per cent more likely to stay with their organisation – if your best and brightest are leaving you because they don't feel happy with their lot, then you have a problem.

There's plenty of literature out there still that treats business as is it were warfare, seemingly taking inspiration from the behaviour of the drill sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket*. Ray Williams, writing for *Psychology Today*, does a fine job of debunking this sort of thinking. You could, however, look to the military for a more positive sort of inspiration, as Simon Sinek has done. The title of Sinek's book and subsequent TED Talk [Leaders Eat Last](#) came from speaking to Lieutenant General George Flynn of the US Marine Corps. Flynn explained the order in which Marines take their meals is in inverse relation to their rank; the lowest first, the highest late. By putting the needs of others above their own, the leaders cultivate a culture of trust, through which the units can operate as one. If this behaviour allows people to trust each other with their lives, then imagine what it might do in a business environment.

It'll take more than eating your lunch later than your reports, of course – though any small action that demonstrates you put their needs above yours would certainly be a

step in the right direction. William Baker (who served as president of WNET for 21 years) and Michael O'Malley (Principal at Cineáltas Human Resource Consulting), authors of [Leading with Kindness: How Good People Consistently Get Superior Results](#), advocate what they call a “transformational” leadership style to improve engagement. This is defined by compassion, integrity, gratitude, authenticity, humility and humour, and, yes, empathy.

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How to be a more empathetic leader

Here are a few practices you might try if you want to improve engagement and retention:

- Try to cultivate curiosity about other people, inside and outside your organisation. Curiosity expands our empathy when we talk to people outside our usual social circle, encountering lives and worldviews that are different from our own.
- Challenge prejudices – especially those that encourage non-empathetic thinking – and seek out commonalities between people and ideas. Challenge your own assumptions about other people, always maintaining an open-minded attitude.
- Put yourself in other people's shoes, and try to experience the world through their eyes. This habit allows you to understand your employees' motivations, hopes and difficulties, and to create the right support mechanisms to allow them to achieve at the highest-possible level.
- Listen to your employees, and open up to them by sharing your own personal experiences, setbacks and feelings too. Employees who feel they are seen and heard are likely to be more motivated and more productive, and to display a higher commitment to their organisation.
- Inspire collective action and collaborative teamwork. Leading by example, empathetic leaders inspire the same actions in other people in their organisations, a phenomenon called mirroring. Moreover, as empathy strengthens bonds of trust, it will lead to better and healthier team dynamics.
- Think creatively and embrace design thinking, of which empathy is very much the cornerstone.

What makes human beings special

Look closely at these qualities and reflect; you'll see there can be no conflating empathetic leadership with weakness. Indeed, being alive to the needs of others, not kowtowing to damaging ideas from above, and not taking out your problems on others require a good deal more strength than simply barking orders and insults at those below you in the pecking order. It is of crucial importance to look for these qualities in your hiring process, to encourage this sort of thinking at every level.

Gender balance is no panacea – “reptilian behaviour” (Sinek’s term) still pervades the thinking of those of both sexes who believe they must act in a dominant fashion to get ahead – but some semblance of gender equality could still have a positive effect.

One final thing to think about: the increasing prominence of robots and automation. This has reached a point where even the man hotly tipped to be the next Governor of California is ready to [take on Silicon Valley](#) over the ethical questions it poses. “Your job,” said Gavin Newsom, at a UC Berkeley commencement speech, “is to exercise your moral authority... to do the kinds of things in life that can’t be downloaded.”

AI will become more and more advanced as the years go by. There is one thing which it may never be able to do, though: empathise. It’s what makes human beings special, and what has got us to our position of global dominance. Perhaps it’s time we acknowledged and embraced it.

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About Ileana Stigliani

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Ileana Stigliani is Professor of Design & Innovation and Academic Director of Imperial Business Design Studio. Her research focuses on the cognitive aspects of innovation. In particular, she studies how material artefacts and practices influence cognitive processes – such as sensemaking and sensegiving, categorisation, and perceptions of organisational and professional identities – within organisations.

In 2016, she received the Imperial Business School Teaching Excellence Award for Innovation in teaching. She received her PhD in Management from Bocconi University, Milan.

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