

The Virtues and Vices of Leader Empathy: A Review of a Misunderstood Construct

Authors : John G. Vongas, Raghid Al Hajj

Abstract : In recent years, there has been a surge in research on empathy across disciplines ranging from management and psychology to philosophy and neuroscience. In organizational behavior, in particular, scholars have become interested in leader empathy given the rise of workplace diversity and the growing perception of leaders as managers of group emotions. It would appear that the current zeitgeist in behavioral and philosophical science is that empathy is a cornerstone of morality and that our world would be better off if only more people – and by extension, more leaders – were empathic. In spite of these claims, however, researchers have used different terminologies to explore empathy, confusing it at times with other related constructs such as emotional intelligence and compassion. Second, extant research that specifies what empathic leaders do and how their behavior affects organizational stakeholders, including themselves, does not devolve from a unifying theoretical framework. These problems plague knowledge development in this important research domain. Therefore, to the authors' best knowledge, this paper provides the first comprehensive review and synthesis of the literature on leader empathy by drawing on disparate yet complementary fields of inquiry. It clarifies empathy from other constructs and presents a theoretical model that elucidates the mechanisms by which a leader's empathy translates into behaviors that could be either beneficial or harmful to the leaders themselves, as well as to their followers and groups. And third, it specifies the boundary conditions under which a leader's empathy will become manifest. Finally, it suggests ways in which training could be implemented to improve empathy in practice while also remaining skeptical of its conceptualization as a moral or even effective guide in human affairs.

Keywords : compassion, empathy, leadership, group outcomes

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