20 24 STATE OF WORKPLACE EMPATHY

A Game Plan for Putting Empathy Into Action

businessolver®

PART 2

Table of Contents

A Note From Our Chief Strategy Officer

Our empathy findings never cease to amaze and astonish me. It's like unstacking a set of nesting dolls as we dig deeper into the findings—each layer provides more insights. In this manner, we allow the data to guide and shape the story of empathy, with mental health emerging as a dominant theme this year.

For some, the mental health findings are probably surprising. After all, many organizations have boosted their mental health benefits and there's more emphasis on the importance of mental health at large since the pandemic. In fact, the first part of our study, "Empathy Under Pressure," reveals 9 in 10 respondents say mental health is just as important as physical health. And yet, mental health is still a dire issue with over half of CEOs and employees citing a mental health issue in the past year.

These findings strike a chord with me. I've been open about my own mental health experience and can empathize with those who face their own struggles today. As a leader, my thinking immediately goes to how do we fix this? But mental health isn't something you fix for someone. Employers, however, do play a vital role in providing empathetic pathways to support employees who are struggling with their mental health.

Over the nine years of our study, flexibility consistently ranks as a top empathetic benefit—this year with 94% of employees saying flexible work hours is the top way organizations can demonstrate empathy.

But employers may overlook an emerging reality: Flexibility isn't just about better work-life balance. It's a mental health initiative, it's a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiative, and it's one of the cheapest benefits an employer can provide in today's economic environment. Of course, not every employer can offer the same degree of flexibility, but the data points to a pressing need for organizations to be intentional and creative about finding pathways to it.

Our findings likewise highlight the crucial interplay between empathy and accountability. Employees view accountability as an essential aspect of empathy. Ed Batista's analysis illustrates this relationship well. When organizations strike an optimal balance between high accountability and high empathy, the best outcomes are achieved.

But that's easier said than done, and it's why this second half of our study centers on the behaviors that are most likely to promote empathy in the workplace. Like everything, empathy isn't a destination. It's a continuous journey and my hope is that our findings help organizations along their way.

Rae Shanahan,
Businessolver Chief Strategy Officer

Empathy and Accountability Go Hand-in-Hand

The first part of our 2024 State of Workplace Empathy study, "Empathy Under Pressure," revealed widespread mental health and workplace toxicity issues along with large gaps in employee benefits offerings. Key findings showed that 55% of CEOs and 50% of employees have faced mental health challenges over the past year, with Gen Z reporting the highest incidence at 65%. The presence of toxic work environments could be exacerbating these issues, as evidenced by 52% of CEOs and Gen Z who view their workplaces as toxic. In fact, employees who say their workplace is toxic are 47% more likely to experience mental health issues.

Additionally, despite all audiences—CEOs, HR professionals, and employees—agreeing that they highly value empathy and recognize its impact on business performance, substantial barriers persist to its practical application. Notably, 63% of CEOs report it's hard to consistently demonstrate empathy in their day-to-day.

> **"** The empathy that you inject into the workplace from a leadership perspective is where this starts because you've got to be...not only connected or in touch with the wellbeing of your employees, but you've got to be able to respond to it and act on it.
>
> – Finance CEO interview,
> 2024 State of Workplace Empathy

The Top Barriers to Empathy Sit With Leadership and Being Too Busy

Of those who say it's difficult to consistently demonstrate empathy in their day-to-day, these are the top 5 barriers cited across total respondents.

1 My manager or leadership doesn't support being empathetic at work
36%

2 My colleagues aren't supportive when I try to be empathetic
32%

3 I'm too busy with work
30%

4 I'm not sure how to express empathy in the workplace
29%

5 I'm not sure what I should say or do
28%

The practical, day-to-day application of empathy in the workplace is where the second half of our study focuses, revealing that the most significant empathy gaps of all center around putting empathy into action. Essentially, data shows empathy is in high demand but poorly executed—both at the organizational and individual level.

→ **There's more data in the appendix:** See the top barriers to empathy for CEOs, HR, and employees.

You indicated that it is hard to consistently demonstrate empathy at work. Which of the following are the biggest causes for that?

Empathy is in High Demand but Poor on Execution

On average, 44-point gaps exist between the top 10 behaviors all respondents rate as empathetic versus the behaviors they report experiencing in their workplaces over the past six months. At 51 points on average, even wider gaps exist between the behaviors respondents rate as empathetic versus what they've demonstrated themselves, uncovering a sort of empathy paradox: **CEOs, HR, and employees universally want empathy but fail to model the behaviors they value.**

These large behavioral gaps prompted us to dig deeper, with the goal of helping organizations bridge these monumental empathy divides with actionable strategies and data-driven insights. As such, we analyzed the 20 empathetic behaviors rated by our respondents. We found that certain behaviors are more strongly correlated with positive perceptions of empathy within organizations while others, such as workplace flexibility, are fast becoming table stakes demonstrations of organizational empathy.

To date, a clear strategy for nurturing an empathetic culture has been an ambiguous undertaking for organizations and leaders who believe in the power of empathy. However, with the help of this data, it's our hope that organizations can take the next step in prioritizing and following through on the actions and behaviors that truly enhance empathetic interactions within their teams and culture.

83%

Across the board, 83% of employees, HR professionals, and CEOs agree that empathy is undervalued by U.S. organizations.

Empathy and Accountability Go Hand-in-Hand

The path forward involves actively demonstrating empathy through targeted actions across three foundational pillars:

Support the Professional

Support the Whole Person

Support Their Community

By intentionally supporting key actions that rank highly within these pillars—such as developing personalized career roadmaps, going the extra mile to help a team member, supporting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives, and prioritizing flexibility and work-life balance—organizations can cultivate an environment where empathy thrives.

✅ **Start Here:** Cultivate an environment where empathy can thrive by fostering a workplace culture where employees at all levels are accountable for demonstrating empathetic behaviors.

The foundation of an empathetic culture rests on the ability to support employees across 3 pillars which include 20 behaviors examined in this report.

Support the Professional

The professional persona seeks meaningful career development, clear roadmaps for advancement, greater autonomy, and consideration for flexible working arrangements among other meaningful behaviors rooted in empathy.

Support the Whole Person

Employees are whole individuals whose personal and professional lives are inherently intertwined. They expect employers to acknowledge and support their need to balance responsibilities at work and home.

Support Their Community

Employees crave a sense of belonging within their teams and communities at work and beyond. From organized initiatives like DEIB to individualized efforts like going the extra mile to help a colleague, supporting one's community takes empathetic behavior to the next level.

Putting Empathy Into Action: Go Beyond the Concept

Desire for empathy is high, but execution is low. This is evidenced by 55% of CEOs who think they lead empathy at work, but only 28% of employees and 22% of HR share that view. Empathy is not solely a CEO responsibility—it's everyone's and starts with self awareness and accountability for one's own actions.

How to Own Empathy at Work

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but there are some foundational practices organizations can adopt to put empathy into action in meaningful ways. Here are three to start with:

1. Support Flexibility, Autonomy, and Work-Life Balance: Individuals increasingly desire autonomy in the form of workplace flexibility (in all its evolving forms) and the ability to integrate work and life for improved balance. How does your organization support this each day? Is there room for change?

2. Lead by Example: Everyone is responsible for owning empathy in the workplace. How are you demonstrating empathy in your day-to-day? Does your organization's policies and culture support a foundation of empathetic behaviors everyone can hold themselves accountable to?

3. Commit Time and Budget to Development: Some employees and leaders may not understand how to demonstrate empathy or may feel vulnerable doing so. Commit time and budget to helping employees understand empathetic practices and feel comfortable demonstrating them.

The next section outlines the top behaviors employees want in their workplace. Start by looking at your organization—how do your policies, benefits, and behaviors support these empathy must-haves?

The ROI of Empathy: Employees Prioritize and Put a Premium on Empathetic Employers

What's becoming increasingly clear in the data is that all audiences largely value empathy and recognize empathy as key to driving performance outcomes. In fact, employees, HR, and CEOs are in strong agreement regarding the top four perceived benefits of being an empathetic organization including improved job satisfaction, employee motivation, productivity, and culture gains. The largest variation among groups occurs in the number five spot. CEOs are more likely to see the connection between empathy and the outward benefits it can drive for an organization.

> "
> **Employee satisfaction surveys, which we do poll on, have gone up in the time that we've started to talk about empathy.**
>
> – Finance CEO interview,
>   2024 State of Workplace Empathy

Top Five Benefits of an Empathetic Workplace

CEOs

Improved job satisfaction
42%

More motivated employees
42%

Better company culture
41%

More productive employees
41%

Better customer service
38%

HR Professionals

Improved job satisfaction
51%

Better company culture
47%

More motivated employees
44%

More productive employees
43%

More trusted leadership
39%

Employees

Improved job satisfaction
50%

More motivated employees
50%

More productive employees
48%

Better company culture
48%

Lower turnover rates
42%

In your opinion, what are the most important benefits of being an empathetic organization? Rank the top 5

Although not listed in the top five, all groups largely see the financial upside of empathy with CEOs (82%) and HR (75%) respectively in agreement that financial performance is tied to empathy. Gen Z (84%) and Millennials (76%) as well as employees working in the Banking (78%) and Technology (76%) sectors are most likely to link empathy to financial performance. However, Boomers (57%) and Government employees (56%) are the least likely to link empathy to financial performance.

Believe a Company's Financial Performance is Tied to Empathy

CEOs
82%

HR Professionals
75%

By Industry

Manufacturing	77%
Banking	71%
Healthcare	69%

Employees
70%

By Industry

Banking	79%
Technology	81%

By Generation

Gen Z	84%
Millennials	76%

Contributing to financial performance, data shows that empathetic cultures are strong motivators and retention magnets for employees, with some groups more inclined to work longer hours and take slightly less pay for a more empathetic employer. Overall, 67% of employees, 79% of HR, and 85% of CEOs say they are willing to work longer hours for an empathetic employer, with Gen Z (78%) and Millennials (73%) more inclined to do so.

Even in the present inflationary economy, 52% (+5 points YOY) of employees say they'd be willing to take slightly less pay to work for a more empathetic employer. At 79%, CEOs are much more inclined to prioritize an empathetic employer over pay, and CEOs at larger organizations (1k+) are even more likely to do so at 84%.

Additionally, a strong belief remains across audiences that empathy should be evaluated as a part of employee performance with 87% of CEOs, 79% of HR, and 71% of employees all in agreement that empathy should be a factor in both employee advancement as well as dismissal for those that don't demonstrate it. This sentiment is highest among in-person (73%), Gen Z (84%), Millennials (79%), and employees in the Banking (82%) and Technology (75%) industries.

88% of employees would be willing to stay with an employer that empathizes with their needs. This could look like:

• Supporting flexibility at work
• Diversifying mental health benefits
• Investing in career growth and professional development

"
It's one of the main reasons I took this job. I find that the 40-hour work week is completely outdated...I took a $10,000 pay cut to take this job because of work from home.

– Government employee interview, 2024 State of Workplace Empathy

Attitudes Around Empathy in Employment Decisions

Willing to work longer hours for an empathetic employer

CEOs
85%

HR Professionals
79%

Employees
67%

By Industry
Finance	77%
Healthcare	67%
Technology	84%
Hospitality	76%
Manufacturing	78%
Government	60%

By Generation
Gen Z	78%
Millennials	73%
Gen X	64%
Boomers	58%

Willing to take slightly less pay to work for a more empathetic employer

CEOs
79%

HR Professionals
59%

Employees
52%

By Industry
Finance	56%
Healthcare	48%
Technology	61%
Hospitality	47%
Manufacturing	49%
Government	45%

By Generation
Gen Z	69%
Millennials	64%
Gen X	49%
Boomers	33%

Putting Empathy Into Action: How to Create a Culture that Prioritizes Empathy

Creating a culture that values empathy in your organization can drive significant performance and productivity gains while also enhancing job satisfaction and employee motivation. Here are three ways organizations can create more empathetic workplaces:

1. Performance evaluations: Adding empathy as an element of your performance evaluations encourages accountability which translates into employees upholding these behaviors in the workplace.

2. Leadership training and development: Committing budget and time to development of empathetic behaviors and understanding of why empathetic leadership is important, is especially key to helping managers and leaders lead by example.

3. Employee recognition: Acknowledging personal and professional milestones and achievements prioritizes the whole human, helping everyone feel like they have a meaningful role in the organization.

Empathy is Important but Lacks Execution

If everyone sees the upside of empathy, why isn't it showing up more? Our findings reveal the most significant empathy gaps of all revolve around executing on empathetic behaviors. **Something is getting lost in translation between valuing empathetic behaviors and the positive outcomes they drive and putting empathy into action.**

To effectively bridge these gaps, it's crucial to identify the empathetic behaviors most valued alongside the biggest gaps in executing on those behaviors, allowing organizations and individuals to translate this knowledge into tangible and optimized actions.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 shown on the following pages display the top 10 behaviors that total respondents (employees, HR, and CEOs) consider most important for demonstrating empathy in the workplace, compared with their personal experiences or actions. These top 10 behaviors were derived from a list of 20 in the survey which respondents evaluated using a 5-point scale (extremely important, important, neutral, not really important, not important at all).

> " I'm not shown any appreciation or respect in regards to taking on extra work...interfering with my own family time. It's just not a very caring environment.
>
> – Healthcare employee interview,
>   2024 State of Workplace Empathy

How to cultivate empathy at work: Support peers, leaders, colleagues, and direct reports in owning and actioning on empathetic behaviors. Positive reinforcement around the behaviors people want, but aren't yet experiencing, helps to establish a supportive environment where empathy is the expectation, not the exception.

This year's findings reveal staggering double-digit gaps in the practical application of empathy at work when viewed from an 'important' and 'extremely important' perspective:

44 POINT GAP

Experience Gaps: On average, there is a 44-point gap between the top 10 'important' and 'extremely important' behaviors respondents rate as empathetic and the behaviors respondents say they've experienced in their workplace over the past 6 months.

51 POINT GAP

Demonstration Gaps: On average, there is a 51-point gap between the top 10 'important' and 'extremely important' behaviors respondents rate as empathetic and what they've demonstrated themselves in the past 6 months in their workplace.

Employees Want Autonomy, Recognition, and Freedom to Balance Work and Home

Respondents prioritize empathetic behaviors that provide flexibility and respect their individualized working styles while also giving them the autonomy needed to balance work and personal responsibilities. As such, **Supporting the Professional** and **Supporting the Whole Person** rise in importance as we look across the empathetic behaviors respondents say are 'important' and 'extremely important.'

Table 1

Top 10 'Important' and 'Extremely Important' Empathetic Behaviors Versus Behaviors Experienced in the Workplace (Total Respondents)

Behavior	Important/Extremely Important	Experienced at Work	Gap
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	85%	35%	50 points
Recognizing employees' important professional milestones	86%	39%	47 points
Making time to talk one-on-one about challenges or problems at work	87%	42%	45 points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	89%	44%	45 points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for flexible working hours	86%	42%	44 points
Being direct / giving direct feedback	88%	45%	43 points
Understanding and/or respecting personal working styles	86%	43%	43 points
Going the extra mile to help a colleague/team member meet an immediate deadline	85%	43%	42 points
Understanding and/or respecting the need to balance priorities between home and work	87%	46%	41 points
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	88%	48%	40 points

How important are each of these behaviors to you in general as they relate to your workplace? And, which of these behaviors have you personally experienced at work in the past 6 months? Total respondents (3,101); important/extremely important; sorted by gap size.

There's more data in the appendix: See how CEOs, HR, and employees prioritize our list of 20 empathetic behaviors.

The Empathy Paradox: Individuals Want Empathy but Don't Demonstrate It Themselves

Building a culture of empathy requires self-awareness and accountability at both the organizational and individual levels. There are likewise even more substantial gaps when we look at the empathetic behaviors respondents said they had demonstrated themselves in the workplace, presenting an "empathy paradox" of sorts: **Individuals desire empathy but don't display empathetic behaviors to the extent that they receive them**. To bridge these behavioral gaps, it's essential for individuals to actively model the empathetic behaviors they wish to experience.

Table 2

Top 10 'Important' and 'Extremely Important' Empathetic Behaviors Versus Behaviors Individuals Exhibited Themselves (Total Respondents)

Behavior	Important/Extremely Important	Exhibited Yourself at Work	Gap
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	85%	30%	**55** points
Recognizing employees' important professional milestones	86%	32%	**54** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	89%	36%	**53** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for flexible working hours	86%	33%	**53** points
Being direct / giving direct feedback	88%	37%	**51** points
Making time to talk one-on-one about challenges or problems at work	87%	36%	**51** points
Understanding and/or respecting personal working styles	86%	35%	**51** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need to balance priorities between home and work	87%	37%	**50** points
Going the extra mile to help a colleague/team member meet an immediate deadline	85%	36%	**49** points
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	88%	40%	**48** points

How important are each of these behaviors to you in general as they relate to your workplace? And, which of these behaviors have you exhibited yourself at work in the past 6 months? Total respondents (3,101); important/extremely important; sorted by gap size.

There's more data in the appendix: See more analysis across empathetic behaviors in the workplace.

Managers Succeed in Empathy but Fall Short in Career Development Behaviors

While there is a notable disparity between the importance and experience of empathetic behaviors among all respondents, this gap narrows significantly when focusing on behaviors demonstrated by managers toward their employees. Note, Table 3 displays a rank order view versus the 5-point scale view shown in the previous tables. Respondents were asked to rank the top 5 behaviors that they want to see from people in leadership.

Although discrepancies remain in how managers handle career development and fair treatment, they are notably effective in connecting with the human side of their employees.

Table 3

Top Empathetic Behaviors Wanted From Managers and Leaders Versus Experienced Directly from Managers

Behavior	Want from Managers/Leaders	Experienced Directly from Manager	Gap
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	36%	26%	10 points
Developing personalized career roadmaps for employees to advance within the organization	25%	16%	9 points
Being direct / giving direct feedback	35%	29%	6 points
Understanding and/or respecting the need to balance priorities between home and work	32%	26%	6 points
Making time to talk one-on-one about challenges or problems at work	31%	25%	6 points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for flexible working hours	30%	24%	6 points
Understanding and/or respecting personal working styles	28%	22%	6 points
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	25%	19%	6 points
Recognizing employees' important professional milestones	27%	22%	5 points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	30%	26%	4 points

You mentioned you have experienced the following behaviors at work in the past 6 months. Which of these behaviors have you experienced directly from your manager? Now, please rank the top five behaviors that you want to see from people in leadership/ manager roles in the workplace. Total respondents (3,100); sorted by gap size.

There's more data in the appendix: See more analysis across remote, hybrid, and in-person work modes.

Where Aren't Managers Delivering on Empathy?

The most significant gaps pertaining to managers' demonstrations of empathy occur in the **Support the Professional** pillar. When analysis is isolated to what respondents say is important to experience from managers and leaders versus what they are experiencing directly from their manager, behavioral gaps dwindle considerably compared with a broader view of the workplace. This makes sense as it's human nature to feel more empathy toward those closest to us, with empathy diminishing the further out from that nucleus.

What managers can do:

1. Schedule regular one-on-ones to discuss work challenges and growth opportunities

2. Develop personalized career road maps for employees

3. Be intentional about equitable treatment and leadership styles that support both the team and individual employees

Where Managers and Leaders Are Falling Short

Support the Professional

• Developing personalized roadmaps for career advancement
• Being direct/giving direct feedback
• Making time to talk one-on-one about the challenges or problems at work
• Understanding or respecting the need for flexible work hours
• Understanding and/or respecting personal work styles

Support the Whole Person

• Demonstrating an employee's family is equally as important as their job
• Understanding/respecting the need to balance priorities between home and work
• Recognizing employees' important professional milestones
• Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues

Support Their Community

• Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances

Conversely, the top empathetic behaviors that managers are delivering on include:

• Making time to ask employees about their family and friends
• Inquiring about employees' personal interests or passions outside of work

How Can Leaders Bridge These Gaps?

A recent study by O.C. Tanner showed that 41% of employees feel their leaders' expressions of empathy are empty of meaningful deeds. Desire for support that goes beyond surface-level demonstrations of empathy is evident in our findings as well. The biggest gaps between important behaviors versus experienced on the manager front occur in areas that take the most time, effort, and intention such as developing personalized career plans, making time to talk one-on-one, recognizing employees, and ensuring fair and equitable treatment.

In today's high-pressure environment, employees crave workplaces that not only understand their personal priorities but also actively support their career progression while fostering an equitable, inclusive, and connected community in their work environments.

Managers are crucial to fostering a culture of empathy: 38% of employees and 33% of HR professionals see managers as key to building an empathetic culture, but for empathy to permeate an organization, *everyone* plays a critical role.

> **Empathy is the glue that keeps an organization together. Having empathy or emphasizing empathy doesn't weaken you. A lot of people talk about empathy being a soft skill, but it's really a hard skill. It fortifies you as a leader.**
>
> – Amy Wilson, Empathy in Action Lab, "Healing for Work"

A Culture of Empathy Isn't a Top-Down Imperative—Everyone is Accountable

Perhaps the answer to closing these pervasive empathy gaps lies in where the responsibility for building a culture of empathy rests. When looking at the CEO data, from the first part of our study, "Empathy Under Pressure," it's easy to point fingers at the CEO—to say they're out of touch with reality in many aspects. But is it the CEO's responsibility to own a culture of empathy, or is it a team imperative where everyone plays a vital Chief Empathy Officer role?

While 55% of CEOs (+17% from 2020) believe they are the primary stewards of company culture, only 28% of employees and 22% of HR professionals share this view. Instead, employees (38%) and HR professionals (33%) believe managers play a crucial role in shaping company culture, with HR also seeing themselves (31%) as significant contributors. HR like CEOs, however, seemingly overestimates their ability to impact culture: Employees rate HR at 12%; CEOs rate HR at 16%.

How HR can cultivate empathy stewards in the workplace:

- Leadership training to develop strong teams and workplace dynamics
- Policies that cultivate a healthy and safe workplace
- Resources and benefits that support work-life balance and wellbeing

Table 4

Who is Responsible for Building a Culture of Empathy?

	CEO	HR Professionals	Employees
My manager or supervisor	16%	33%	38%
Employees	12%	14%	22%
My CEO	55%	22%	28%
My HR professionals	16%	31%	12%

Thinking about your own company/organization, who do you believe has the most impact on building a workplace culture of empathy?

Putting Empathy Into Action: Accountability and Empathy Are Co-Dependent

Today, many organizations lack a game plan for building and sustaining an empathetic culture. The problem is multi-faceted from lack of accountability and understanding to persistent stigmas and widespread mental health issues. At the end of the day, everyone is accountable for empathy and the only way empathy thrives within a culture is when it's everyone's job.

How to Drive Accountability for Empathetic Behavior
Empathy must be a team imperative—an initiative owned by all and executed by all. Here are three ways everyone can be accountable for empathy at work:

1. Seeking out and embracing diverse perspectives

2. Supporting peers and colleagues with feedback, flexibility, and deadlines

3. Embracing clear communication methods, including giving and receiving direct feedback in a caring way

> Empathy is a team sport, not a solo endeavor. When I talk to our new hire classes, I remind them that the culture is in their hands too. If you came here for the culture (as many of our employees do) and if you like what you see, then you need to support it with your peers and your day-to-day interactions.
>
> – Jon Shanahan, Businessolver President and CEO

Empathy in Action: Top Behaviors That Drive Organizational Empathy

While best practices for empathy exist, an actionable strategy for how to optimize and scale organizational empathy has been hazy at best. This year's study, however, shows that the foundation for building an empathetic culture rests on supporting employees with behaviors that fall into in three distinct categories: professional, whole person, and community.

Support the Whole Professional

"Trust us to get the work done. It does feel sometimes we're babysat a little bit, like they only let us get two days from home." –Government employee

The professional persona seeks meaningful career development, clear roadmaps for advancement, greater autonomy, and consideration for flexible working arrangements among other meaningful behaviors rooted in empathy.

Support the Whole Person

"I've heard other companies actually offer mental health days. I have to just say I'm sick if I'm like feeling sad or having a bad week, because taking a day off for my mental health wouldn't be a valid excuse in my field." –Healthcare employee

Employees are whole individuals whose personal and professional lives are inherently intertwined. They expect employers to acknowledge and support their need to balance responsibilities at work and home.

Support Their Community

"[My company] continued to help nourish my growth as an individual, both within the company professionally and outside because they also have programs for volunteering. They have relationships with the Indianapolis Children's Museum, Big Brothers, Big Sisters and places where I can, you know, go participate and network with other people with like minds and volunteer." –Finance employee

Employees crave a sense of belonging within their teams and communities at work and beyond. From organized initiatives like DEIB to individualized efforts like going the extra mile to help a colleague, supporting one's community takes empathetic behavior to the next level.

As revealed in the first segment of our study, "Empathy Under Pressure," mental health issues, toxic workplace environments, and growing stigmas are compounding the erosion of these pillars. But there are roles for *everyone* to play in stabilizing the pillars and building more empathetic workplaces.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to empathy. While our findings reveal the behaviors most strongly correlated with positive perceptions of empathy in organizations, it's clear people have different empathy needs and expectations.

For optimal outcomes, organizations should enhance these findings with their own by listening to employees and their needs relative to industry, workforce demographics, work arrangement (i.e. remote, hybrid, in-person, desk-based, non-desk-based) and other dynamics at play.

These findings can help organizations construct a high-level game plan for optimizing and scaling empathy by understanding which behaviors are most likely to drive higher perceptions of empathy. That said, they also reinforce that empathy is highly personal, dynamic, and requires further study to understand the nuances of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Formulating an Empathy Game Plan: From Table Stakes to High-Impact Behaviors

To put empathy into action, it's important to understand which specific behaviors have the most impact on promoting empathy at work. Our data revealed that while all behaviors (see Table 5 on the next page) are important to empathy, some are more strongly correlated with positive perceptions of empathy while others (albeit still beneficial) are considered baseline or table stakes demonstrations of empathy.

How to interpret these findings

We conducted additional analysis of empathetic behavior data to understand which behaviors have the highest likelihood of respondents perceiving their organization as empathetic. Table 5 on the next page shows scores from our analysis that explored the relationship between two key factors: 1) the empathetic behaviors respondents experienced over the past six months, selected from a list of 20 behaviors; and 2) respondents' ratings of their organization's current level of empathy on a 4-point scale. This analysis was conducted to predict the likelihood of respondents perceiving their organization as empathetic.

We indexed our findings to provide clearer insights on these behaviors: Scores above 100 indicate that the behaviors have an above-average impact on the perception of overall company empathy, while scores below 100 indicate a below-average impact (though not a negative impact). This method helps quantify the influence of specific behaviors on employees' views of their company's empathy. Organizations and individuals that go the extra mile are acting on the behaviors indexed above 100.

How to Transform Your Culture

• Prioritize policies and team dynamics that support the professional, the whole person, and their community

• Be intentional and consistent about demonstrating and holding others accountable to empathetic behaviors

• Implement resources that develop community and support diverse perspectives, like employee resource groups

Table 5

Empathetic Behaviors That Have the Most Impact on Driving an Empathetic Culture

Organizations are more likely to be viewed as empathetic when community and whole person behaviors are supported alongside the professional. Scores above 100 indicate that the behaviors have an above-average impact on the perception of overall company empathy, while scores below 100 indicate a below-average (but not negative) impact.

Support the Professional

	Total Respondents	Employees
Committing budget and time for employees' professional development at every level	83	**112**
Understanding/respecting personal working styles	95	**109**
Making time to talk 1:1 about challenges or problems at work	30	**85**
Recognizing employees' important professional milestones	79	**83**
Developing personalized career roadmaps for employees to advance within the organization	129	**76**
Understanding/respecting the need for flexible working hours	88	**63**
Being direct/giving direct feedback	17	**11**

Support the Whole Person

	Total Respondents	Employees
Inquiring about employees' personal interests or passions outside of work	135	**162**
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	104	**142**
Being vulnerable and authentic	96	**111**
Recognizing employees' important professional milestones	69	**83**
Making time to ask employees about their family and friends	99	**67**
Understanding/respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	91	**63**
Understanding / respecting the need to balance priorities between home and work	99	**62**

Support Their Community

	Total Respondents	Employees
Voicing support of a woman's right to choose	106	**157**
Advocating on behalf of another colleague	176	**154**
Going the extra mile to help a colleague meet an immediate deadline	169	**153**
Developing/implementing/supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives	153	**145**
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	114	**116**
Developing/implementing sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives	71	**68**

Most of the behaviors in the **Support the Professional** pillar in Table 5 can be considered baseline for fostering organizational empathy, outside of developing careers, budgeting for professional development, and respecting personal work styles. These behaviors indexed above 100, meaning they are the most closely correlated to positive perceptions of an empathetic workplace.

When comparing the indexed behaviors in Table 5 to the top behaviors employees, HR, and CEOs rate as important on a 5-point scale (Table 9 in the Appendix), some behaviors such as ensuring equitable treatment or recognizing employees' important milestones, while rated highly important, become base level demonstrations of empathy in the advanced analysis. Meaning to truly promote empathy, organizations need to take their empathy strategy to the next level by focusing efforts particularly on the Community pillar as well as aspects of the Whole Person pillar.

There's more data in the appendix: See how CEOs, HR Professionals, and employees each prioritize our list of 20 empathetic behaviors.

How to focus your empathy efforts: To foster an authentic culture of empathy, organizations must surpass baseline demonstrations of empathy and zero in on supporting employees' communities at and outside of work.

Support the Whole Professional

Everyone has their own ambitions, goals, and work styles. Growth, be that linear or upward, is important to everyone in the workplace, but our data shows that employees highly value personalized , meaningful support and direct feedback in their professional journeys alongside professional development and career advancement opportunities.

Support the Whole Person

With mental health issues and toxicity on the rise, it's crucial for workplaces to foster an environment of empathy that respects and supports employees' illusive quest for work-life balance. Workplace flexibility scores major employee points and stands out as one of the most cost-effective benefits employers can offer.

Support Their Community

To truly foster cultures of empathy, organizations must surpass baseline expectations and focus extra efforts on supporting employees' communities at work and beyond. DEIB programs, employee resource groups, and volunteer opportunities can foster a sense of belonging and community among employees.

Empathy is Your Strategy for Success

Workplace empathy isn't just a buzzword, it's a strategy for success. It creates a culture that drives job satisfaction, supports wellbeing, motivates people to learn and grow, retains and attracts top talent, and creates a space for communities to thrive.

While the perception of empathy varies in different organizations and even among different roles, the common thread is a positive correlation with how people feel in the workplace: Do they belong? Are they supported? Can they thrive and grow here?

Implementing empathy is a dymanic process, meant to be shaped and tailored to the existing community of your workforce. With the three-pronged approach of supporting the professional, whole person, and community, organizations can start to lay down the foundation for an empathetic workplace culture.

> "
> One of the challenges I face with empathy is having that balanced approach. People and purpose go hand-in-hand, but they miss a third link which is performance. Having that balanced approach where your purpose and your people-centric approach has a balanced view to drive a performance-oriented culture... sometimes it's a struggle.
>
> - Manufacturing CEO interview, 2024 State of Workplace Empathy

Putting Empathy Into Action: Focus on Meaningful Demonstrations of Empathy

To truly foster a culture of empathy, organizations need to take a hard look at how they're meeting (or not meeting) the empathy expectations of their workforce and focus extra effort and intention on supporting employees across all three pillars, at work and beyond. This is not work that happens overnight—it takes time, intention, planning, and even policy modifications.

How to Use These Pillars as Your Guide Posts

While all pillars are of equal importance, our data has made it clear that the Whole Person and Community pillars need additional balance in today's workplaces, focusing on meaningful actions that create a safe, supportive, and functional environment where everyone can thrive.

Support the Professional: How does your workplace support career growth, milestones, and mentorship opportunities?

Support the Whole Person: How can your workplace implement policies and benefits that support more flexibility, work-life balance, and personal wellbeing?

Support Their Community: Does your organization have a robust DEIB program? Are there employee resource groups or other opportunities for employees to connect, including giving back to their communities?

How to Formulate Your Empathy Game Plan

While understanding the empathetic behaviors that index highly is important, there are a host of other considerations when constructing your empathy game plan. Given this year's findings, particular consideration should be given to mental health benefits and resources while fostering a stigma-free work environment that fosters open dialogue and psychological safety.

1 **Make mental health benefits more accessible and visible.** The first part of our study showed that employees value mental health benefits but have very low awareness and utilization of those benefits. To drive benefits engagement, employers should adopt a marketing mindset by boosting awareness and access via an omnichannel approach that provides greater access to benefits in the time of need across preferred engagement channels including mobile, IVR, chat, web, and email.

2 **Dismantle stigmas and break down barriers.** CEOs, HR, and employees alike are struggling to demonstrate empathy due to a host of dynamics at play. They likewise may not be seeking mental health support due to a widespread stigma associated with viewing people with mental health issues as weak or a burden. It's important for leaders of all levels to make a concerted effort to create open dialogue, foster safe environments where individuals can be their authentic selves, and implement listening strategies to put relevant strategies and resources into place.

3 **Embrace workplace flexibility.** Workplace flexibility is becoming a basic expectation of the modern workplace and can take many forms from flexible hours and work locations to job sharing and four-day weeks. Leaders should be creative and intentional about providing a greater degree of flexibility to the extent that their industry and circumstances allow as flexibility is a top-rated benefit and key to supporting mental health and a diverse workforce.

4 **Be accountable and self-aware.** Move away from top-down responsibility in building a culture of empathy. We have only to look at the news to know many leaders fall short. Empathy is everyone's responsibility, and it starts with self-reflection, education, and self-awareness.

5 **Educate managers and empower them to freely demonstrate empathy.** As more employees look to their direct managers for empathy, those managers must be equipped with the tools to foster the empathetic culture employees desire, which our data says centers around more meaningful demonstrations of empathy that may require more time, planning, and thoughtfulness.

The Path Forward: Cultivating a Culture of Empathy is Everyone's Responsibility

Empathetic behaviors are not perceived in equal measure. Certain expressions of empathy are far more effective than others in cultivating empathetic cultures. But our analysis only scratches the surface. There's much more work to be done to understand the nuances of empathy. One thing is certain though, expectations are evolving with the generations, increasingly diverse workforces, and how we work.

With empathy under pressure in so many ways, this year's findings underscore the urgent need for an empathy evolution in U.S. organizations. Leaders must double-down on putting empathy into tangible action while making a concerted effort to address the stigmas and barriers that hinder its practice and perpetuate widespread empathy gaps.

Onus doesn't fall on organizations and leaders alone though. Working in parallel, individuals must be self-aware, accountable, and deliberate in their expressions of empathy—recognizing that the most significant empathy gaps can only be bridged through our own actions.

**Get started with your empathy game plan:**

- **Audit and modify your workplace policies:** For example, where can your organization implement or update policies to demonstrate empathy, such as providing added work-life balance and flexibility for employees?

- **Enhance your benefits and communications:** How can you enhance your benefits to better support employee wellbeing and demonstrate empathetic practices? How are you currently communicating and creating awareness for benefits employees want and need most, such as mental health benefits?

- **Augment your employee resources and culture initiatives:** How are you fostering a sense of belonging, inclusion, and community among employees at work and beyond? How are you supporting diverse perspectives?

> **By formulating a strategic game plan that purposefully supports employees as professionals, whole humans, and their communities at work and beyond, organizations of all levels can foster truly empathetic cultures that improve employee wellbeing and organizational success.**
>
> - Rob Volpe, CEO of Ignite 360 and author of "Tell Me More About That: Solving the Empathy Crisis One Conversation at a Time"
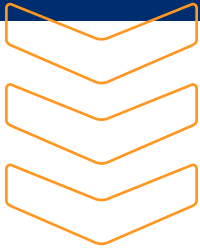
About the 2024 State of Workplace Empathy Study

Over the past nine years, Businessolver has studied the evolution of empathy in the workplace, hearing from collectively more than 20,000 employees, HR professionals, and CEOs about their views on a variety of workplace issues.

Our study examines the behaviors and benefits that make a workplace empathetic. In this study, empathy is defined as "the ability to understand and/or experience the feelings or perspectives of another."

In March of 2024, a third-party firm fielded the online survey of more than 3,000 participants across six industries: financial services, government, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, and government. To qualify for the survey, respondents needed to be 18 years or older, a U.S. resident, and be employed full-time or part-time within their respective organization with 100 or more employees.

Our survey included subgroups for gender, ethnicity, parent/non-parent status, veteran status, self-identified LGBTQ+, managers, work location status (remote, hybrid, in-person), and generations.

Small employers are defined as organizations that employ 100-999 employees. Large employers are defined as organizations that employ 1,000+ employees.

Unless otherwise noted, findings are cited throughout in "Top 2 Box" on 4- and 5-point scales (e.g. agree/strongly agree, important/extremely important).

Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations across nine years of data at Businessolver.com/empathy

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20
24
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Appendix

Empathetic Behaviors Experienced in the Workplace
('Extremely Important'/Top-Box Only)

The charts below display the top 10 behaviors that total respondents (employees, HR, and CEOs) consider most important for demonstrating empathy in the workplace, compared with their personal experiences or actions. These top 10 behaviors were derived from a list of 20 in the survey which respondents evaluated using a 5-point scale (extremely important, important, neutral, not really important, not important at all).

See 'Important'/'Extremely Important' (Top 2 box) findings

When behaviors are analyzed exclusively from an 'extremely important' (Top Box) perspective versus an 'important'/'extremely important' (Top 2 Box) perspective, the gaps narrow significantly and other behaviors bubble to the surface. This provides a laser-focused view of where organizations have the most opportunity to improve their demonstrations of empathy in the workplace—namely **Support the Whole Person** and **Support Their Community** pillars.

Table 6

Top 10 'Extremely Important' Empathetic Behaviors Versus Behaviors Experienced in the Workplace (Total Respondents)

Behavior	Extremely Important	Experienced at Work	Gap
Voicing support of a woman's right to choose Note: "Woman's right to choose," while specific to our survey, is representative of a broader need for organizations to support causes that represent their values and workforce community.	32%	18%	**14** points
Being vulnerable and authentic	32%	23%	**9** points
Committing budget and time for employees' professional development at every level	35%	26%	**9** points
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	43%	35%	**8** points
Developing / implementing/supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives	39%	31%	**8** points
Advocating on behalf of another colleague	33%	26%	**7** points
Developing / implementing sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives	33%	26%	**7** points
Developing personalized career roadmaps for employees to advance within the organization	35%	29%	**6** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	48%	44%	**4** points
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	50%	48%	**2** points

How important are each of these behaviors to you in general as they relate to your workplace? And, which of these behaviors have you personally experienced at work in the past 6 months? Total respondents (3,101); extremely important only; sorted by gap size.

Support the Whole Person
- Being vulnerable and authentic
- Demonstrating an employee's family is equally as important as their job
- Understanding/respecting the need for time off to take care of personal, family, or medical issues

Support Their Community
- Voicing support for a woman's right to choose
- Developing/implementing DEIB initiatives
- Advocating on behalf of another colleague
- Developing/implementing sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives
- Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances

Empathetic Behaviors Individuals Demonstrate Themselves
('Extremely Important'/Top-Box Only)

Narrowing findings to an 'extremely important' (Top Box) view, shown in Table 7 below, shines a brighter light on the most significant gaps pertaining to self-demonstrations of empathy. **Support the Professional** and **Support Their Community** pillars, which are reflective of a greater desire for flexibility, professional development, and focused career planning, show the greatest gaps.

See 'Important'/'Extremely Important' (Top 2 Box) findings

Table 7
Top 10 'Extremely Important' Empathetic Behaviors Versus Behaviors Individuals Exhibited Themselves

Behavior	Extremely Important	Experienced at Work	Gap
Voicing support of a woman's right to choose	32%	17%	**15** points
Developing / implementing/supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives	39%	25%	**14** points
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	43%	30%	**13** points
Committing budget and time for employees' professional development at every level	35%	23%	**12** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	48%	36%	**12** points
Developing / implementing sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives	33%	22%	**11** points
Developing personalized career roadmaps for employees to advance within the organization	35%	24%	**11** points
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	50%	40%	**10** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for flexible working hours	42%	33%	**9** points
Being direct / giving direct feedback	46%	37%	**9** points

How important are each of these behaviors to you in general as they relate to your workplace? And, which of these behaviors have you exhibited yourself at work in the past 6 months? Total respondents (3,101); 'extremely important' only; sorted by gap size.

Support the Professional
- Committing budget and time for employees' professional development
- Developing personalized roadmaps for career advancement
- Understanding/respecting the need for flexible work hours
- Being direct/giving direct feedback

Support Their Community
- Voicing support of a woman's right to choose
- Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances
- Developing/implementing DEIB and ESG initiatives

Empathetic Behaviors by Work Mode
('Extremely Important'/Top-Box Only)

Remote workers display much smaller gaps in comparison to in-person and hybrid workers in empathetic behaviors related to "understanding and/or respecting the need for time off…" which they already benefit from in a remote setting. Conversely, they may observe fewer instances of their manager advocating for others due to the nature of remote work.

Table 8

Top Gaps Between Behaviors Rated 'Extremely Important' and Behaviors Experienced Directly from Managers by Work Mode

Behavior **In-Person**	Extremely Important	Experienced at Work	Gap
Advocating on behalf of another colleague	32%	10%	**22** points
Going the extra mile to help a colleague/team member meet an immediate deadline	39%	19%	**20** points
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	42%	20%	**22** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	49%	27%	**22** points

Hybrid			
Advocating on behalf of another colleague	32%	11%	**21** points
Going the extra mile to help a colleague/team member meet an immediate deadline	39%	22%	**17** points
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	47%	22%	**25** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	50%	29%	**21** points

Remote			
Advocating on behalf of another colleague	22%	10%	**11** points
Going the extra mile to help a colleague/team member meet an immediate deadline	28%	11%	**17** points
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	46%	27%	**19** points
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	54%	45%	**9** points

You mentioned you have experienced the following behaviors at work in the past 6 months. Which of these behaviors have you experienced directly from your manager? And how important are each of these behaviors to you in general as they relate to your workplace? 'extremely important' only; employees only.

Top 20 Empathetic Behaviors by Audience
('Important'/'Extremely Important'/Top 2 Box)

Table 9

Comparison of the Top 20 Empathetic Behaviors by Audience: CEOs, HR Professionals, and Employees

Behavior	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
Understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of personal family or medical issues	91%	90%	91%
Ensuring equitable treatment while considering individual needs and circumstances	86%	90%	90%
Being direct / giving direct feedback	89%	91%	89%
Understanding and/ or respecting the need to balance priorities between home and work	89%	90%	89%
Making time to talk one-on-one about challenges or problems at work	88%	91%	87%
Understanding and/or respecting personal work styles	86%	90%	87%
Demonstrating that an employee's family is equally as important as their job	87%	87%	87%
Going the extra mile to help a colleague/team member meet an immediate deadline	87%	88%	86%
Recognizing employees' important professional milestones	86%	88%	86%
Understanding and/or respecting the need for flexible working hours	89%	86%	85%
Advocating on behalf of another colleague	83%	83%	82%
Recognizing employees' important personal milestones	86%	88%	82%
Developing personalized career roadmaps for employees to advance within the organization	88%	84%	79%
Committing budget and time for employees' professional development at every level	90%	85%	77%
Making time to ask employees about their family and friends	86%	81%	76%
Developing / implementing / supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives	88%	82%	74%
Inquiring about employees' personal interests or passions outside of work	81%	79%	69%
Being vulnerable and authentic	82%	76%	69%
Developing / implementing sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives	87%	76%	66%
Voicing support for a woman's right to choose	84%	72%	59%

How important are each of these behaviors to you in general as they relate to your workplace? Shown in Top 2 Box; important/extremely important.

Significant Barriers Persist to Putting Empathy Into Action

Table 10

Top Barriers to Empathy Among CEOs, HR, and Employees

	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
Uninterested			
I'm too busy with work[1]	33%[2]	32%	**37%**
Empathy doesn't have a place in the workplace	**37%**	30%	24%
I am not an empathetic person[3]	23%	15%	18%

[1]Boomers (45%), Gen X (38%), and Millennials (36%) are significantly more likely than Gen Z (25%) to say they're too busy.

[2]Millennial CEOs are the most likely to say they're too busy (34%) and that colleagues aren't supportive (46%) while Gen X CEOs (54%) feel their manager/leadership doesn't support being empathetic at work; Millennial CEOs (48%) share this sentiment. And Gen Z (50%) are the most likely to say empathy just doesn't have a place in the workplace.

[3]Gen Z (29%) is most inclined to say they're just not empathetic.

	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
Unsupported			
My manager or leadership doesn't support being empathetic at work	**46%**	31%	37%
My colleagues aren't supportive when I try to be empathetic	**41%**	32%	31%
I'll be viewed as weak	**38%**	18%	31%

	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
Unskilled			
Culturally I wasn't raised to show empathy	**35%**	18%	25%
I'm not sure how to express empathy[4]	**31%**	23%	26%
I'm not sure what I should say or do[5]	26%	25%	33%
I don't feel confident in my ability to be empathetic[5]	25%	28%	25%

[4]Boomers (39%) and Gen Z (28%) are most likely to say they're unsure how to express empathy.

[5]Boomers (52%) are far more likely to say they're unsure what to say/do.

You indicated that it is hard to consistently demonstrate empathy at work. Which of the following are the biggest causes for that?