

Q. Periodically, I see articles about empathy and supervisors. The dictionary defines empathy as the “ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” Why is this so important?

A. Empathy in the workplace has wide application for supervisors. A simple example would be recognizing an employee is experiencing grief and offering a supportive response. A complex example would be listening to an employee’s complaints but suspending your judgment and not labeling the worker as a malcontent, but instead focusing on understanding, discovering a solution, and implementing it to benefit others. When you spend time observing behaviors of employees and engaging with them, you begin to identify their feeling states. Over time, you develop a skill called “empathic reach” or “accurate empathy.” You’re not a mind reader, but you are able to detect with higher frequency and accuracy, issues and concerns affecting your employees. You are also perceived by employees as a safe person to approach with problems and concerns. For these reasons, empathic supervisors build strong loyalty among their employees.



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Q. I don’t visually observe my employees since many of them are now working remotely. I would like to keep an eye open for signs of stress, but how is this done without seeing attendance, interpersonal behaviors, or attitude problems?

A. Several research studies that track employee mental health have shown that the pandemic has taken its toll. What’s tricky is helping managers support the mental health of employees without stepping into a diagnostic role. Increasing communication with workers is a good idea because this can naturally lead to more discovery about how your employees are doing generally. Another tip is to be appropriately open about, or at least acknowledge your own feelings of, stress during this COVID-19 era. This “disclosure begets disclosure” idea can prompt your employees to share their own stress issues. You can then mention or encourage use of the EAP. Note that when an employee shares something personal with you as a manager, the degree to which they demonstrate anxiety or concern is usually minimized. Understanding this can keep you from also minimizing the importance of an issue that could urgently need EAP help.

Research study: <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health/>