

Softway

Leadership in a crisis

How you can show compassion
for your teams while still
getting the work done.



An unprecedented business landscape

Health concerns. Unstable markets. Remote work challenges. Shifting political and social tides. Companies have never faced so much tumult in such a short period of time. And while these challenges affect our businesses as a whole—they also have an impact on our people, individually.

Common remote team performance issues in 2020:

Underperforming individuals

Disconnected teams

The challenge of delivering and receiving feedback remotely

A sense of high stress and anxiety

As we battle new external forces, our teams are looking to us—their leaders—for guidance and compassion. At the same time, the livelihood of the businesses we serve is depending on us to remain outcome-focused.

Who can leaders turn to in this new, uncharted territory?

~~No one.~~ Each other.



Sharing our learnings

This guide was created by Softway to help leaders find a path forward.



Why listen to us?

At Softway, our vision is to bring humanity back to the workplace. In fact, through our [Seneca Series](#) experience, we've helped thousands of leaders and teammates around the world bring more trust, empathy, and compassion into their work lives for better business results.

But as the landscape of workplaces everywhere changed in 2020—we realized this was a whole new ballgame.

What we've experienced in 2020:

- In March, our clients began pausing work—driving our revenue to a near standstill
- We made the excruciating decision to furlough 60 percent of our U.S. office in order to save the business
- At the same time, we completely changed our business strategy, including our entire team structure—all while suddenly shifting to completely remote operations
- We experienced the internal culture challenge of bringing employees back from furlough

How we moved forward

As our teams acclimated to this new reality, we gradually found what worked—and what didn't—to effectively lead our teams while meeting critical business objectives.

The most important lesson we learned:

Lead with empathy, not sympathy.

Let's talk *empathy*

Changing the culture inside your company is no small feat. While it may not be the right time to embark on a full-scale culture change strategy, one way you can start making incremental progress is to focus on building empathy inside your organization.



Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

It's a simple idea that's often misunderstood. Let's look at what empathy is and what it isn't, in a practical way.

The difference between **sympathy** and **empathy**

Empathy often conjures the word sympathy, and vice versa. While many people use them interchangeably, these are two separate concepts. Let's look at the high-level differences.

Sympathy

Sympathy is an intellectual understanding of what someone has gone through, often accompanied by pity, guilt, sadness, or sorrow.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes—regardless of whether you have shared a specific experience or not.

It should be noted: sympathy isn't a bad thing. In fact, we can use feelings like sadness, pity, or guilt that often accompany sympathy as a way to start identifying opportunities for connection. Empathy, on the other hand, is a mindset we can use to know how to help someone.

Putting empathy to work is deliberate and takes practice.

Are you missing the value of empathy in your business?

From helping employees better manage stress to breaking groups out of their silos for new ideas—there are many ways empathy can help improve your organization, starting right now.



To help you get it right—let's talk about how we often get it wrong

Here are a few common missteps when it comes to bringing empathy into your business—and what you can do to solve them.

Situation 1

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Sympathetic leaders say:

“Let me know what I can do to help.”

Empathetic leaders say:

“I know there’s a lot on your plate, and I want to make sure you have everything you need to be successful. I’ve set up a quick one-on-one with you to go over tasks and see if there’s anything we can redistribute.”

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Leadership insights

As leaders, it's our job to have a pulse on the morale, engagement, and stress levels of our teams. If you're sensing someone needs your help, that's great! That's the beginning of empathy in action.

Where it goes wrong: offering to “help” with bland, general statements about being there if a team member “needs anything.” As a leader, you need to use your legitimate power to understand specific work challenges, remove obstacles, and make a clear path toward meeting those goals.

Otherwise—you're asking someone to do mental work that they're not in a place to do.

What appropriate action looks like here:

- Reprioritizing workloads
- Reassigning deliverables
- Reassessing internal deadlines
- Connecting them with company benefits/mental health resources
- Personally taking on some of their work
- Helping clear their plates for leave (if needed)

Situation 2

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Now, it's time to talk about deadlines.

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Now, it's time to talk deadlines.

Sympathetic leaders say:

"I know everyone is busy. I'm flexible on when you send work my way. Just get it to me when you can."

Empathetic leaders say:

"To help you plan out this upcoming week, I'm going to set some specific deadlines for each of the deliverables. Let's talk if you have any scheduling issues."

Situation 2:

Your team has been slammed for weeks. If you're being honest with yourself, you're starting to feel guilty.

Now, it's time to talk deadlines.

Leadership insights

What's wrong with that first statement (i.e. keeping deadlines flexible)? Many coworkers might say nothing. But for teammates who crave structure and clear expectations, soft expectations are an easy way to spiral into a productivity standstill.

While a casual "send it whenever" is intended to help defuse any mounting anxiety, it doesn't actually help your team get the work done sooner. In fact, it often only adds vagueness to an already high-stress situation. When we talk about sympathy vs. empathy, this is an example of letting our own discomfort drive our actions.

What appropriate action looks like here:

- Check to see if anything can be redistributed
- Personally take on work if possible (especially if team members are getting burned out)
- Learn more about the different working styles on your team
- Begin discussions with upper management about workload concerns

Situation 3

A valued team member experiences a death in the family.

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Sympathetic leaders say:

“Our thoughts are with you and your family.”

Empathetic leaders say:

“I’m so sorry to hear about your loss. Don’t worry about work. I have a meeting scheduled with the project manager to redistribute your tasks. Please feel free to ask me any questions, but don’t feel pressured to respond to this.”

Situation 3:

A valued team member experiences a death in the family.

Leadership insights

It's always important to extend sympathy when an employee leaves on bereavement. The issue: stopping there. For employees to feel secure enough in their roles to spend much-needed, healing time with family—they need to know their work is taken care of.

Whatever that looks like on your team (we've included some ideas below), it's important to remember—the point isn't just about saying we're thinking about you. It's about putting that thought into action.

What appropriate action looks like here:

- Clearing the teammate's calendar for them
- Switching ownership on all existing tasks (not just in words, but in project management systems, too)
- And, of course, sending a sympathy card or gift to your team member

Situation 4

A colleague is balancing their workload with child care duties at home.

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Sympathetic leaders say:

“You can’t meet? I’ll see if we can push our deadline out.”

Empathetic leaders say:

“I understand it must be tough to juggle child care and work right now. Let’s discuss whether we need your input in real-time, or if we can send you notes and have you add your feedback by end-of-day.”

Situation 4:

A colleague is balancing their workload with child care duties at home.

Leadership insights

Yes, it can be personally frustrating to have new limitations on meeting time with your team. But if we think empathetically about our teammates with caretaking responsibilities, they need the support and flexibility to manage their critical roles both inside and outside of work.

As a leader, your actions can either put a pause on productivity—or [help team members with children](#) keep moving forward. Whether that means collaborating asynchronously or finding non-traditional hours to regroup, you may need to get creative to find something that works for you and your team.

What appropriate action looks like here:

- Have a 1:1 with team member to fully understand their current work/life schedule
- Identify times when you can meet outside of regular work hours (when needed)
- Get in the practice of working asynchronously by recording meetings, sharing notes, etc.

Situation 5

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Sympathetic leaders say:

“Welcome back. I hope you got to do something fun on your time off! Let’s get you loaded up with some new tasks.”

Empathetic leaders say:

“We’re so happy to have you back. Don’t expect to start working at full capacity just yet—I know there’s a lot of adjustment that needs to happen. Let’s work together to talk priorities so we can get you back up to full speed.”

Situation 5:

Part of your company has been furloughed. Now, the first wave of employees is returning.

Leadership insights

We know that stark changes to employment status can have a dramatic impact on company culture—even after everyone is back. (We recently experienced this ourselves at Softway.) It's a sensitive subject for people who stay on and for those who have been furloughed. But it's important to NOT avoid talking about furloughs inside your company.

Remember: furloughs are not vacations. (Please avoid referring to it as “time off.”) Your team needs to be able to process the changes that have happened over the past few months, and find solutions to new challenges as they arise.

By being able to speak openly about hard things, your teammates see that there's always a way around them. It may feel awkward, but opening up those lines of communication is important for creating a stable routine.

What appropriate action looks like here:

- Be ready to check in on newly returning employees by text, call, email—whatever works best
- Start returning employees off with a few half-days, so they can re-adjust to work life (even remotely)
- Want more? Check out our free [Furlough guide](#).

Strong teams start with empathy

When it feels like so little is in our control, it might seem like empathy is an odd place to start improving your business outcomes. But it's important to remember: when we commit to understanding what the people around us are experiencing, we create opportunities for deeper, more fruitful connections. With our teammates, with our clients—with everyone.

By deliberately introducing more empathy into your business, you can:

- Support a stronger, more open culture of trust that welcomes valuable feedback—and can help optimize your business
- Enable the psychologically safe environment that produces innovative thinking faster—so your business can adapt quickly and survive
- Strengthen morale and reduce stress during uncertain times—contributing to more stable teams for greater efficiency, reduced downtime, and increased productivity
- Help teams work more efficiently and effectively in this new remote landscape—while laying the foundation for broader culture change initiatives
- Create the framework and mindset for stability—in 2020 and beyond

“The role of a leader is not to come up with all the great ideas. The role of a leader is to create an environment in which great ideas can happen.”

—Simon Sinek

About us

Softway, a full-service digital transformation agency, is the proud creator of the Seneca Series—a catalyst for organizational culture change. We've inspired change for teams of thousands across the globe, with new lessons in development to address diversity and inclusion (D&I), furlough transitions, and much more.

Want to know more about how our Seneca Series can help leaders and teams in your organization better navigate crisis? [Let's talk.](#)

More human-centered advice to help you manage uncertainty.

[Seneca Series website](#)

Softway's comprehensive system for teaching every team member how to be a better leader.

[Diversity & Inclusion \(D&I\) guide](#)

We break down some of the current complexity of D&I—while offering key starting points.

[Furlough guide](#)

Learn how to set your team up for success before and after furlough—the human way.

